ゼロの使い魔 6

〈贖罪の炎赤石（ルビー）〉

ヤマグチノボル

MF文庫J

Novel Illustrations

ヤマグチノボル（やまぐち・のぼる）

1972年2月、茨城県生まれ。「カナリア～この想いを歌にのせて」（角川スニーカー文庫）でデビュー。著書に「グリーングリーン 緑ノ音ファンタスティック」「つっぱれ有楽川!」（共に角川スニーカー文庫）「落ちかけのラプレター」（富士見ミステリー文庫）「グリーングリーン 緑ノ音スタンド・バイ・ミー」（MF文庫J）など多数。小説連載も数多く手がけている（富士見ファンタジア「トルロイヤル号」、「グリーングリーン」「Gonna Be??」「ゆきうた」「私立アキバハラ学園」「魔界天使ジブリール」「そらうた」など。ゲームシナリオライターとしても活躍中。

Illustration

◎**兎塚エイジ**（うさつか・えいじ）

大阪出身、大阪在住の大魔人。6月16日生まれ。
現在、ガウマン私ムがモラスカ全国ツアーです。
今までの参加作品は「逢とさまといっしょ」「電撃文庫」です。

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ゼロの使い魔6

暗罪の炎赤石

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ゼロの使い魔6　暗罪の炎赤石

才人はある日突然異世界ハルケギニアに「召還」されてしまった高校生。元の世界に戻る方法を探しつつ、美少女魔法使い・ルイズのもとで使い魔として暮らしている。ルイズの通うトリステイン魔法学院は夏休みが終わり、下町でアルバイトしていた才人たちも学校に戻った。だが、アルビオンとの戦いが本格化するのにそなえて、生徒たちは多くが従軍することになり、ルイズは従軍の許可を得るために才人をつれて帰郷する。だが、許しがもらえないどころか、ルイズが身分違いの者に恋していると知った実家は大騒ぎに……。ルイズと才人は、そしてトリステインの明日はどうなる!?　大人気の異世界ドラマティックラブコメ、いよいよ新展開！

MF文庫J ヤマグチノボルの本

- **グリーングリーン 緑ノ音スタンド・バイ・ミー**［原作・監修／GROOVER　イラスト／くろたま舎合］
- **ゼロの使い魔**［イラスト／兎塚エイジ］
- **ゼロの使い魔2 風のアルビオン**［イラスト／兎塚エイジ］
- **ゼロの使い魔3 始祖の祈祷書**［イラスト／兎塚エイジ］
- **ゼロの使い魔4 契約の水精霊**［イラスト／兎塚エイジ］
- **ゼロの使い魔5 トリスタニアの休日**［イラスト／兎塚エイジ］
- **ゼロの使い魔6 暗罪の炎赤石**［イラスト／兎塚エイジ］

ゼロの使い魔 6

〈贖罪の炎赤石（ルビー）〉

ヤマグチノボル

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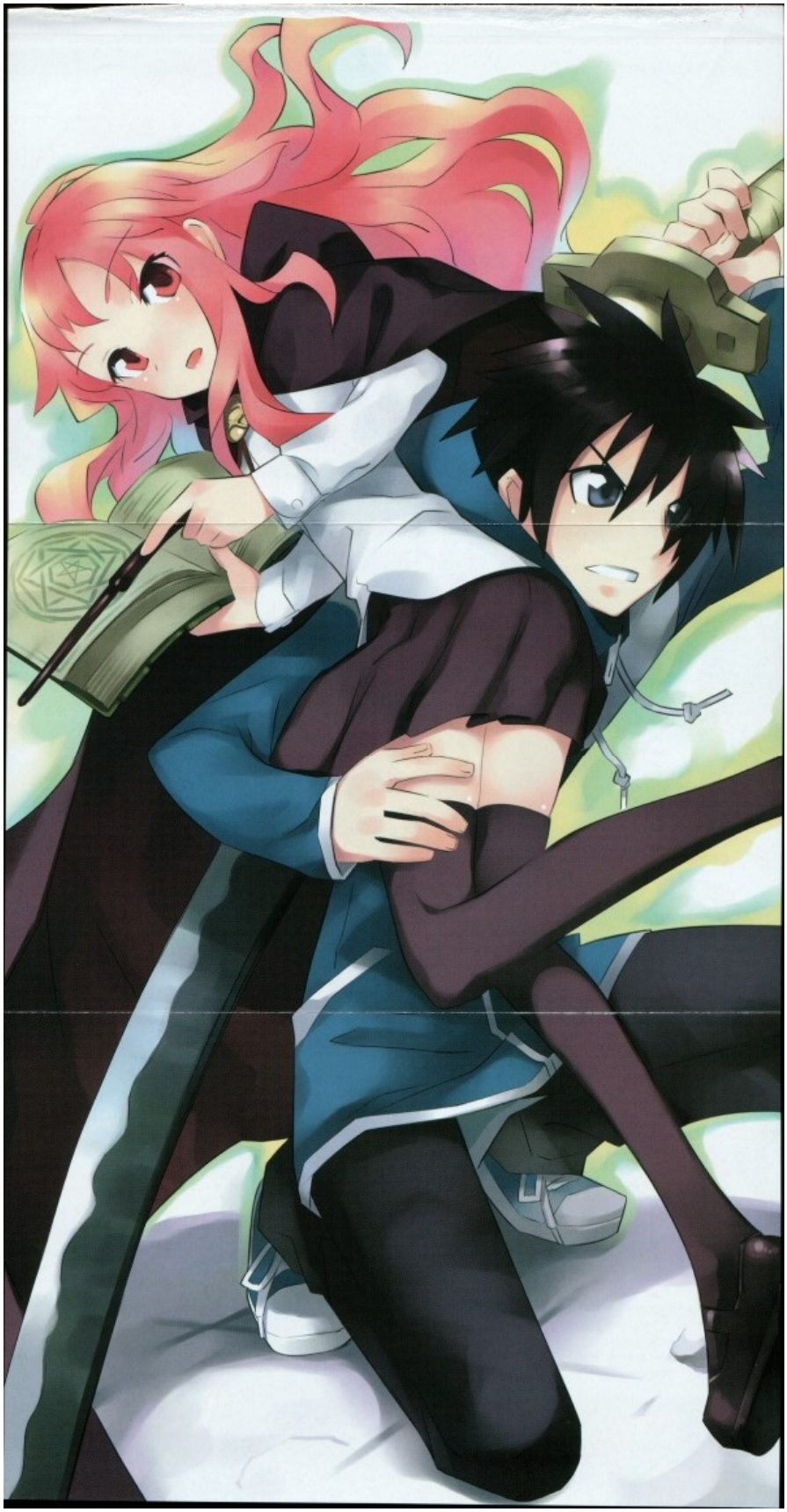


コルベール
トリステイン魔法学院の先生。
「火」系統の使い手で、発明好き。
二つ名は「炎蛇のコルベール」。
カトレア
ルイズのすぐ上の姉。
顔立ちはルイズによく似ているが、
性格は優しくおっとり。
タバサ
「風」系統の魔法を得意とする、
無口な少女。
唯一キュルケには心を開いている。
平賀才人(サイト)
ルイズの使い魔「ガンダールヴ」。
あらゆる武器を扱うことができるが、
武器がなければタダの高校生。
ルイズのことを可愛いと
思っているが……。
ルイズ
伝説の系統「虚無」を操る。
誇り高く意地っ張りな
貴族のお嬢様。
最近ちょっと才人を意識している。
キュルケ
「火」系統を得意とする
トライアングル・メイジ。
奔放で惚多き女。
性格のまったく違うタバサとは
親友同士。

ゼロの使い魔6

贖罪の炎赤石（ルビー）

ヤマグチノボル

MF文庫J

Chapter One: Homecoming

“Travelling sure is exciting!”

Siesta shouted, pushing her large chest against Saito's arm.

Rather than "exciting" I'd say it's "touching."

With a flustered face, Saito gave a short nod.

Inside a carriage, sitting next to each other, were Saito and Siesta.

Siesta was wearing a dark green one-piece dress with high boots.

Also, she had a small straw hat, which altogether made for quite the nice appearance.

When the black haired, sweet and innocent Siesta had that appearance, she seemed almost too cute overall.

More than just being cute, it was hard to hold anything back.

Damn you, putting me in this condition.

And the worst part was that, while making such an oddly audacious move, the cute Siesta was still radiating a sweet, innocent atmosphere.

As she sat next to Saito, she hugged one of his arms to her and squeezed her breasts against it.

“S-S-S-Siesta, when you get so close to me... your breasts are touching my arm and…and…” Saito said, half crying and becoming incomprehensible...

“Ah, I meant to do it!”

Siesta said with a totally carefree, smiling face.

“L… Like that, on purpose, that there is a person like you here, hey, you…”

Saito, who couldn’t stop talking, in order to soothe his own conscience, protested.

“You don’t have to worry about the coachman. He’s a golem.”

The young man sitting on the coachman stand was indeed a golem, a puppet which moved somehow or other with the use of magical power.

Now that you mention it, its eyes are like glass beads emitting light.

Consequently, this made Siesta even bolder. She placed her cheek on Saito’s shoulder and her mouth near his ear, mixing sighs with her voice.

“…Doing it like this, just the two of us…it’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

“Y… Yeah.”

“I think I heard about it sometime, but during summer break, what did you do with Miss Vallière?”

I can’t tell her that.

I can’t say that Henrietta requested a secret mission from us.

Though it was mostly washing dishes and stuff, it's a secret.

“Uh, umm, that is…, I worked at a bar. Louise worked in the castle so…, what she did, I don’t know,” Saito lied about Louise. Saying the truth about himself is probably alright, he decided.

“Oh! A bar! Saito did? Why?”

“Eh, uh, that is… I don’t have any money.”

“If it’s something like that, a money thing, just tell me and I would be happy to help!"

“You would?”

“Yes, it isn’t much, but I've scraped my wages and saved!"

As expected of a reliable village girl. Instead of squandering money, she’s quite frugal.

Siesta’s kind proposal made Saito glad.

“It’s alright. Somehow, I managed!”

“Really? But, if at times you are in need, please tell me without holding back."

There is no way I can borrow even a little bit of money from this admirable girl who has scrimped and saved like this.

“I can't borrow money from you, Siesta!”

“Why? As long as it's for Saito-san, money isn't important to me!” When she finished speaking, the girl lowered her shoulders.

“Ah, right, you mean you are really not interested in using my money right?”

“That's not the reason why!”

“You must hate me!”

”No, it's nothing like that!”

“Really? But Saito-san is always so cold to me...”

“I am? How so?”

“I am sitting next to you, and you aren't making a move.”

While Saito moved around hastily, Siesta hummed a little and moved her lips to his neck. The kind of feeling that can make a person melt surprised Saito to no end.

Siesta moved her lips upwards, finally nibbling Saito’s ear.

While feeling as if his brain was about to melt, the air seemed to grow cold and as a shivering sensation went down his spine. He shakily squeaked, "Si-Si-Siesta..."

In the instant he said that, something blew the top of the carriage away.

Well, blown is not the right word. It was more like some hidden explosive sent the whole thing flying. In that moment Saito and Siesta’s carriage suddenly changed from an enclosed carriage to one with a sky-light.

Trembling from fear, Saito slowly turned around and saw a carriage that was nearly twice the size and far more luxurious, pulled by two horses.

Sensing a killing intent emanating from the carriage, Saito didn't become simply afraid, but extremely afraid. *It looks like I'm going to die before we arrive at our destination.*

The luxurious carriage released an overwhelming aura of death.

“Wa…Wa…the roof of the carriage!” Siesta wailed while latching onto Saito.

“Si-Siesta..”

“What, What is happening?”

“If you don’t want to die, I think we should sit apart.”

But that only made Siesta cling on to Saito even tighter.

“I don’t know what's going on, but my heart is pure!”

She screamed and pushed Saito down. On one side, Saito was very happy and excited about her feelings, while another kind of message flashed through his mind, “Haha, this is the end of my life. It really was too short, I hope I'll at least

get to return to Japanese soil..”

From the carriage that was running behind Saito’s, from the window of that splendid carriage, Louise was sticking out her head, holding a light brown wand in her hand, shaking in anger and breathing heavily.

The roof of Saito and Siesta’s carriage was blown away by Louise with her Void magic, “Explosion.”

Because of the window on the back of the carriage, Louise could see everything going on inside.

Louise was shaking while watching them as they hugged each other inside their coach and Siesta kissed Saito’s neck.

Finally, as the maid’s lips came up to her familiar’s ear, Louise’s anger exploded. She wouldn’t let her own familiar get kissed.

However, as the roof was being blown off, she noticed that Siesta embraced Saito even tighter.

Louise’s eyebrow went up instantly and just as she was about to spell the happy couple’s doom, someone pulled her legs.

“Kya!”

As she yelled that, her cheeks were stretched

“Id hurds! Yan! Au! Funya! Ahh! Id hurds!”

The prideful and haughty Louise getting her face pulled in such a manner, was unable to raise a single complaint. If Saito had been able to see this scene, his eyes would have most likely popped out in shock.

The one pulling Louise’s cheeks like that was… a beautiful blond woman. She was about twenty-five years old. Her face vaguely resembled Louise’s. If Louise

cooled down her hot blood and grew up a bit, would she look like that as well? In short, she was a beautiful woman.

“Little Louise. My talk hasn’t finished yet, has it?

“Auu..., I’b sowwy..., Abe-saba, I’b sowwy...”

As her cheeks were being stretched, Louise shouted with a teary voice. There were a total of four absolute existences in Louise’s life. Henrietta, her parents and this bossy old sister, Eléonore. Eleven years older than Louise, the eldest daughter of the La Vallière house was known to be the best researcher in the Royal Magic Research Institute, "Academia."

“Even though it is a long-awaited conversation with me, why do you restlessly keep looking somewhere else? Moreover, you blew up the attendants’ carriage roof!”

“That’s, um… I wanted to, um, separate my familiar from the maid, that’s why…”

Just like that, Louise very hesitantly informed her older sister.

As Eléonore curled up her hair, she sharply stared at Louise. Like a frog targeted by a snake, Louise curled herself up.

“Let the attendants do whatever they want! As always, you’re a restless kid, aren’t you?! You are a daughter of the La Vallière house, you know?! Be more self-conscious!”

“O-Okay…”

Louise quietly drooped her shoulders.

“B-But… Whatever you say, being taken by the academy’s maid is…”

“Shrimp. Are you listening? The La Vallière house is not simply a Tristainian noble family, it is *our* noble family. Even you should understand that, right?”

“Yes, Onee-sama.”

“You can’t use only your familiar as an attendant, right? Louise, a lady, you know, is a person that should, at the very least, always have one female attendant to take care of her when traveling.”

Eléonore, serving at Tristain’s Academia, came this morning to the Academy of Magic in order to take Louise home with her.

She caught Siesta, who was passing by with a laundry basket in her hands, and said “This girl will be good enough as a female attendant during the journey,” and after getting a nearby aristocrat teacher’s consent, she took Siesta along for the sake of looking after Louise.

Siesta and Saito boarded the carriage for attendants, after it was forcibly prepared by the academy’s employees. Louise and Eléonore boarded their own coach that was used to come to the academy.

There were practically no stops, so there really wasn’t any need for help along the way. Siesta was simply a decoration. However, to nobles, that ornament was very important.

As for Louise’s innermost thoughts, they weren’t calm at all.

That’s because this homecoming wasn’t a part of the plan at all.

The military operation to invade Albion was proclaimed at the school after the summer break ended, approximately at the time the two moons overlapped…

It had been many decades since the last time the king’s troops had insufficient officers in order to organize an expeditionary force. It was decided that in order to do that, aristocrat students were to be assigned as officers. One of the teachers and the academy’s headmaster Osman were against that, but Henrietta, the Cardinal, and the Queen’s army’s generals ignored that objection. The academy was closed down until the end of the war.

The bearer of the “Void,” the court lady under Henrietta’s direct supervision, Louise, in order for the invasion strategies to succeed, was to be given special

missions.

However… after Louise reported to her parents that “For the fatherland’s sake, I will join the queen’s army in order to take part in Albion’s invasion,” it ended up causing a huge ruckus.

Joining the campaign wasn’t allowed, and, after a letter arrived and Louise ignored it, Eléonore came.

Naturally, Louise was very angry. What about going to the front? Even now all across the country, at our parade grounds and garrisons, a lot of students were training to become temporary officers. Most of them were male students that chose to enter the war.

I am a girl, but I have to protect Her Majesty’s honor as her court lady. Moreover, in this invasion plan, the airplane of my familiar is supposed to play a key role.

There are a lot of expectations placed upon my Void as well. Henrietta and the Cardinal consider me the Queen’s army’s trump card. As a Tristainian noble, there is no greater honor than that.

Well, I definitely don’t like war. But, for the princess’ and the fatherland’s sake I’d like to offer my poor ability. Since the Void was given to me I have a duty to be zealous in my loyalty to the fatherland. Isn’t the loyalty to the fatherland one of the things the noble family of La Vallière house is boastful of? And yet my own house has opposed my firm resolution to join at the front.

“Really, you’re doing such selfish things! War? What would you do there?! Good things? Get ready to get scolded by Mother and Father when we get home!”

“B-But…”

Just as she was about to answer back, her cheeks got pinched. Eléonore was completely treating Louise as a kid, just like in the old days. Just like when she answered back during her studies, she called her a shrimp over and over again.

“'But'? 'Yes', you mean, shrimp?! Little Louise!"

As expected of sisters. Eléonore had the same expression as Louise at the times when she trained her familiar. Louise couldn't do anything to oppose her.

"Fue, Au, Ouch, Ane-sama, my cheeks au au…"

She said with a pathetic voice.

As the incantation never flew over no matter how long he waited, Saito let out a sigh of relief. It seemed like for some reason Louise wasn't able to complete her incantation.

It seemed that while she was sticking to him, Siesta became happy, so perhaps she had forgotten that there was no roof.

"Hey, hey, Saito-san."

"Hm? W-What?"

"Traveling sure is enjoyable!"

"Y-Yeah…"

He nodded. Saito hadn't become that optimistic.

When he thought about the things that were to come, he realized that the problems were piling up.

Henrietta and the others are making war plans. What is going to happen from now on is an assault war. Of course, Louise is going to participate. As things are now, I have no choice but to follow and participate no matter what as well. Most likely for the bearer of Zero there is some kind of war campaign. Most likely we'll have to do something dangerous.

I can't get into a cheerful mood.

Damn it, as soon as this war is over this time I'll search for a way to return to my original world, to Japan, Saito decided. *Until then no matter what happens I*

can't allow myself to die.

Seeing Saito with the face of a person thinking about a lot of things, Siesta's face clouded up.

"I don't want that."

"Hm?"

"Saito-san, will go to Albion as well, right?"

"Y-Yeah…"

It seemed like Siesta's cheerful attitude until now was just a performance to cheer up Saito.

"I, hate the nobles."

"Siesta…"

"It would be fine if they simply killed each other… but they involve us commoners as well… Even if it's for the sake of ending the war… they're just saying that."

Remembering Henrietta's words, Saito muttered

"Doesn't matter if it's for the sake of ending one or beginning one, war is war."

Saito became silent.

Before, during the battle at Tarbes, there was a reason to fight. "Help out Siesta and the village's people," that kind of just cause.

But, during the invasion of Albion this time, what kind of reason was there?

I don't want to fight, is there even a reason behind this fight?

Louise is in high spirits… but I have no interest in this.

But at the time I touched Henrietta I felt a "I want to help such a poor princess' hand" kind of feeling, Saito cheered up a bit.

“Why does Saito-san have to go? You have no relation, right?”

“Well, that may be so, but…” his elbow was caught.

Siesta buried his face into her breasts.

“Don’t die… Don’t die no matter what…”

Saito felt that when Siesta was like this she was lovely.

To be cried for in this a way by such a cute maid… that alone was reason enough for Saito to keep living on… *As I thought, I am an idiot, right.*

But, Louise’s house huh…

Louise’s big sister that I met earlier was a beautiful woman, but she had a hard expression, didn’t she..., he thought. Splendidly, Saito saw her with only a glimpse. At the time they met he noticed that even though her eyes were different from Louise’s, she had the same high-minded attitude. Will Louise give off the same feeling when she grows a bit older? That would be painful.

Also, there was a kind of suspicious feeling in the air. It seemed that Louise and everyone in that house had differing opinions.

This time, we’re going towards the home of that Louise.

Saito looked up at the sky, sighed, and thought with an attitude lacking spirit... what’s going to happen from now on?

In the southern part of Londinium, the capital city of Albion, stood the Howland Palace.

The White Hall inside was indeed an appropriately vital point of the “White Country” Albion.

That place, painted entirely in white, was incredibly impressive. There were sixteen columns supporting the ceiling of the hall.

Like a wound in the wall, a face illuminated by the light was revealed.

In the middle of that hall stood a huge “Round Table” made of rock, around which the ministers and generals of the Holy Albion Republic were gathering, waiting for the start of the council’s meeting.

This was the place at which, until roughly two years ago, the ministers gathered around the king in order to control the country. But the ruler had since changed.

The people that participated in the revolution and took the country from the monarchy gave themselves top posts in the country as was to be expected.

As for the person that, until two years ago, was a simple local bishop…

The one that used to have a lower social status than everyone that had gathered here… even than the protection squad members that were standing on the sides of the door…

The two protection squad members opened the hall’s door.

“The Holy Albion Republic’s noble government congress chairman, gasp, Oliver…”

Cromwell, raising his hand, interrupted the voice…

“G-Gasp?”

“Shouldn’t we remove this useless tradition? Because amongst the people that have gathered here, none stands above another!”

As always, Cromwell’s private secretary, Sheffield, was walking behind him and next to her the figures of the healed up Viscount Wardes and Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt could be seen.

As Cromwell headed towards the chief’s seat, Sheffield followed him like a shadow. Wardes and Fouquet sat down in two free seats.

After the chairman and first emperor were seated, the meeting began. One man raised his hand. It was General Hawkins. With grey hair, white moustache, and a long military service, the general stared with intense eyes at the emperor that

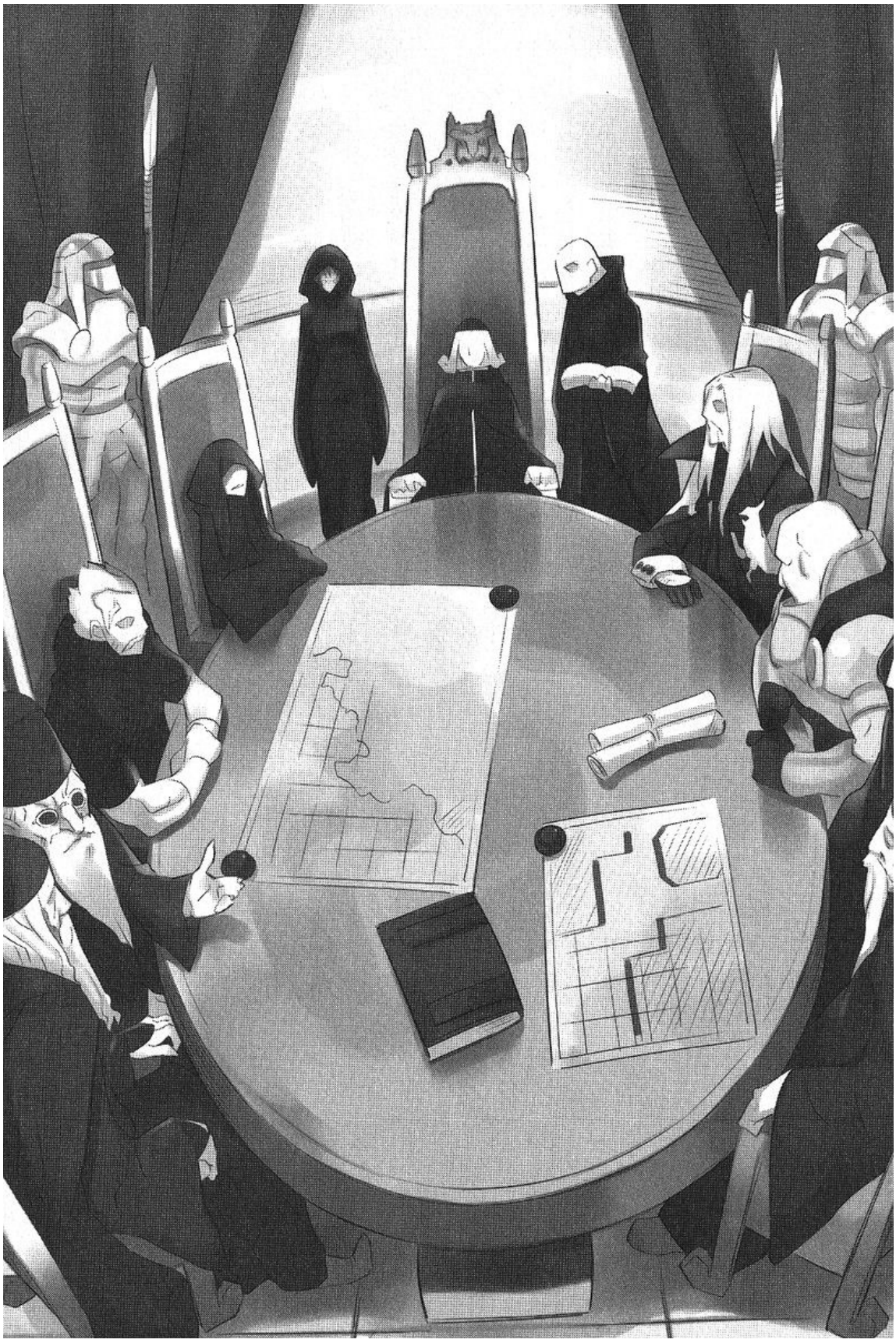
used to be a bishop.

After Cromwell acknowledged him, he stood up.

“Your Excellency, I would like to ask you something.”

“Ask whatever you want.”

“After losing the battle at Tarbes and our army that remained there, reorganizing our naval fleet has become essential. That’s because if we don’t have an armada, we can neither transport our armies nor defend our own territory.”



Cromwell nodded in agreement.

“The secret operation to abduct the Queen in order to earn some time failed as well.”

“That’s right.”

“Have those results reached His Excellency’s ears?”

“Of course. After all, it’s necessary to know everything about the incidents.”

“The enemy army is... ah. Tristain and Germania’s allied forces are preparing their fleets as quickly as possible. The two countries have a total of sixty battle-ready ships that can set out into the sky. Even if we begin the reorganization of our army now, after the maintenance our warship battle-line will not be able to rival theirs. Moreover, their side’s warships are all brand new.”

One of the generals muttered with a voice full of disdain,

“It’s a papier mache fleet. They are inferior to us.”

“That’s a story of the past, Your Excellency. There is no reason to praise our own army now. At the time of the revolution we executed the majority of our superior generals and as a result the strength of our side was weakened. The remaining veterans were lost because of the defeat at Tarbes.”

Cromwell was staying silent.

“At the present, they still haven’t finished rallying their ships. Furthermore, they seem to be calling together the lords’ armies.”

“They’re like a hedgehog. If it’s like that it will be difficult to attack us.”

A fat general blurted that out with a cheerful voice. Hawkins glared at him.

“Difficult to attack? Isn’t it obvious that the enemy’s army is probably scheming something if they’ve gathered so few forces?”

Hawkins hit the table strongly.

“They’re planning to attack this continent, Albion, you know. And, a question.

I’d like to be informed of His Excellency’s defense plan. If it comes to a decisive battle with fleets, we will be defenseless. If the enemy’s army manages to land… it’s over. Our army is exhausted because of the revolutionary war, so please give me an answer…”

“Those are the thoughts of a defeatist!”

A young general with bloodshot eyes criticized Hawkins. Cromwell grinned lightly as he raised one of his hands as a signal to stop.

“In order for them to attack Albion, it will be necessary for them to mobilize their entire military force.”

“However, they have no reason to leave soldiers in the country.”

“Why is that?”

“Because to them, with the exception of our country, there is no other enemy.”

“Do they intend to leave their back unprotected?"

“Gallia declared neutrality. That’s something that was foreseen and is necessary in order for the invasion to take place.”

Cromwell looked over his shoulder and exchanged glances with Sheffield. She gave a small nod.

"That neutrality, what if it were a ruse?"

Hawkins complexion changed.

"It's not real?" "Gallia is really on our side?”

"I wouldn't say that yet. But there are advanced diplomatic meetings with them."

The meeting became an uproar.

"Gallia is going to participate in the war?" "What are there conditions of agreement?" "If Gallia were on our side, it would be frightening" and so on. They began to all shout simultaneously. With a disbelieving face, Hawkins stared at Cromwell. However, Cromwell just fiddled with his mustache.

"Yes, a diplomatic meeting has been arranged."

Hawkins was filled with thoughts. With Gallia's army, they would be able to attack allied Tristain and Germania. If Albion's fleet was about to be defeated, Gallia's forces could surprise the two countries from behind. They would be forced to withdraw their troops.

"If this is true, then it is great news."

"It would stimulate our military. Our offense, our defense, our triumph would be certain."

The generals stood up and all saluted at the same time. Then, they left and returned to their troops.

Cromwell went with Sheffield, Wardes, and Fouquet to his office and after he sat down in the ruler’s seat, he looked at his subordinates.

“Your wounds have healed up, right? Viscount.”

Wardes bowed. Cromwell smiled lightly and questioned Wardes.

“Now then, say what you have to say.”

“As that general pointed out, Tristain and Germania are certainly going to attack us, right?”

“Yeah. So, what are the odds?”

“Evenly matched… no, perhaps our power is a bit greater. The number of our soldiers is lower, but we have an advantage considering position.”

“Also, we have Your Excellency’s Void.”

Fouquet said in a thoughtful manner. As she said that Cromwell coughed unpleasantly.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing. All of you should understand, after I’ve told you so many times, that I can’t use any powerful incantations. Except for giving life to those that have already died, that is. If you keep saying that, I’ll be troubled."

As Cromwell said, he couldn’t use any useful incantations at all.

“I didn’t intend to trouble you. Only that, if we don’t show that we have a trump card, the army’s morale will be lowered.”

As Wardes said that, Cromwell nodded.

“Indeed, there is no greater trump card than the Void.”

“Well then, as I thought, is Gallia going to join the war?”

At the beginning, the plan was for Gallia to aid Albion’s invasion of Tristain by attacking Germania at the same time, but… because Albion’s army was defeated at Tarbes there was a need to change the original plan. The proposition that came from Gallia’s side was to deflect the enemy’s army into the Albion continent, while Gallia took that opportunity to attack Tristain and Germania.

After Wardes heard that plan he said to Cromwell,

“You Excellency, I have only one more thing I’d like to know.”

“What is it?”

“Gallia’s imperial rule is going to aid us in destroying Halkeginia’s monarchic system, is that right? What are we going to do if they’re doing it with an ill intent?"

Cromwell looked at Wardes with cold eyes.

“Viscount, that isn’t something that you should be thinking about. Leave politics to me, it will be good enough to work hard on the duty that has been assigned to you.”

Wardes closed his eyes and lowered his head.

“As you wish.”

“The duty that has been given to you. You’re doing it, right?”

“With everything I have.”

“Menvil.”

As soon as Cromwell called out, the door of the office opened and a single man appeared. He was about forty years old, with gray hair and a wrinkled face, but because of his disciplined body, one couldn’t notice his age. At first glance he appeared to be a swordsman, because of his rough outlook, but he was carrying a cane, so he was a mage.

There was a characteristic of his face that really stood out. Starting from the middle of his forehead, across his left eye and ending at his cheek, there was a big burn.

Cromwell introduced Wardes to him.

“This is Viscount Wardes.”

With an iron expression Menvil suddenly stared at Wardes.

“Wardes you should have at least heard his name, right? He is White Menvil.”

Wardes’ eyes glittered. He had a memory of hearing that name. The legendary mage mercenary. The White Flame. The one that used cowardly methods during a duel and as a result got his noble title confiscated and became a mercenary, killed his own family by burning them to death, and abandoned his house. It was said that the number of the people he had burned so far is greater than the number of the birds he has grilled in order to eat. There were also many other rumors about him that had been floating about.

There was one certain thing in those rumors.

That on the battlefield he used his flame with thorough cruelty. That flame didn’t choose its opponent. He was a man to whom the age and gender of the ones he burned didn’t matter. He was a man that deprived humans of their warmth with his fire freely… that’s who this White Menvil was.

“What’s wrong, Viscount? There’s a legend right before your eyes.”

“I was just thinking, that I’m glad this place isn’t a battlefield.”

Wardes expressed his honest thoughts.

“Now then, Wardes. With you in the lead, I want you to transport a small squad.”

A faint dissatisfaction could be noticed on Wardes’ face. “He wants me to be a carrier?” is what his eyes said.

“I’d rather you don’t make such a grim face. Moreover, I’d like you to serve with perfection. Rather than a small unit, this secret squad is going to need a Wind specialist in order to use a boat as transport. In short, you.”

“… As you wish.”

“Gallia’s army will capture everything, without us having to do anything, so I expect you to at least push 'there'. After you have completed your work report to me immediately.”

Cromwell muttered with an impatient voice.

“Where is 'there' supposed to be?”

“Firstly, it has to be a place where the defense is weak and the room’s price is low. In other words, it mustn’t be too close to the capital of Tristain. Next, it has to be an important place that has a role in politics. Therefore, it mustn’t be too far neither.”

“Role in politics?”

“For example, taking young nobles as hostages would definitely have its effects on the country’s politics, right?”

Wardes’ lips curled up a bit.

With an exaggerated motion, Cromwell informed them of the destination.

“It’s the Academy of Magic, Viscount. As the commanding officer, you will take advantage of the night and head there with Menvil and a small squad.”

At the same time, at the Academy of Magic──

Kirche and Tabitha were taking a walk in Austri Plaza. Right now it was break time. As always, the place was bursting with students, however…

All of them were female students. The figures of the male students, making noise, were nowhere to be seen.

“Well, well, it really feels like war, doesn’t it?”

Kirche spread her hands and shook her head. Most of the male students volunteered to join the Queen’s army, because they were troubled by the lack of officers. She was surprised, because even that coward Guiche volunteered.

All of them were in the middle of training, at the country’s festival grounds, to become substitute officers. It was natural that the academy had quieted down.

Of course, Tabitha was also one of the people that stayed behind. There was no point for Tabitha, who had sworn to take revenge on Gallia’s king, for some unknown reason, to thrust her head into a war at a different place.

Kirche volunteered to join her fatherland’s army as well, but she wasn’t allowed, because she was a woman. She was regretful, because she really wanted to act violently.

Well, because the male teachers departed as well, the lessons were cut in half.

The female students that now had a lot of free time, overcome with loneliness, were searching for rumors in order to find out whether their lovers or friends were safe. Having noticed Montmorency’s figure, sitting on a bench with her elbows on her knees, Kirche approached her.

“My my, since your lover is gone, you’re bored, huh?”

Montmorency looked straight at her, and muttered with an annoyed tone.

“It’s normal for him to be gone. I don’t feel so bad about it.”

“But, aren’t you lonely?”

“That guy, you know, he’s overdoing it even though he’s a coward. Si~gh, but when he’s gone it really is a bit lonely, isn’t it?”

Kirche patted Montmorency’s shoulder.

“Well, they’ll come back before the festival of Founder Brimir’s Descent. After all it’s said that it will be an easy victory if it’s your country’s dear Queen’s and our country’s great Emperor’s armies combined."

Kirche muttered the “dear” and “great” with sarcasm in her voice. From the beginning, Germanian nobles didn’t have much of a loyal heart. After all, it was a country that was created by lords who gathered together because they had similar interests.

“That would be nice.”

Montmorency sighed.

While looking at such a Montmorency, Kirche ended up feeling a similar painful feeling. “I don’t like it… I really don’t like war,” muttered the one that was always prepared to fight.

Kirche and Tabitha were walking lazily when they arrived at Colbert’s laboratory, which was located next to the Tower of Flame. In there, Colbert was working very hard in order to finish the final war adjustments of the Zero Fighter.

Even though most of the male teachers had departed… Colbert was in his usual “my pace” mood. As soon as the winds of war started blowing, he immersed himself in his studies.

“It’s pretty busy, isn’t it?”

Kirche asked that Colbert with an unsure voice.

“Hm?” Colbert raised his head a bit and smiled.

“Oh, Miss. Miss Zerbst. You should take my lectures on Fire Manipulation from time to time.” Colbert said as if he were still in class.

“Yes.”

Kirche answered with an uncomfortable and a bit sad face and nodded.

“What’s wrong? Miss…”

“Sir, You didn’t volunteer to join the Queen’s army, did you?"

Even though most of the academy’s men joined the war, is what she meant by that.

“Hm? Yeah… Because I hate war.”

Colbert turned his face away from Kirche. Kirche snorted with a face full of disdain. “So unmanly”, she thought. She could see nothing but a person that had run away from the war. She couldn’t forgive this teacher who, even though he was one of the proud “Flame Users,” calmly declared that he hated war.

“As a person that also uses Fire, I’m embarrassed.”

Colbert was facing down for a while, but then he looked up again.

“Miss… you know? The Fire’s purpose…"

“Isn’t only fighting, is what you want to say, right? I’m tired of hearing that.”

“That’s right. That’s simply the way it’s being used. Nothing except for destruction…”

“I don’t want to listen to a coward’s blabbering.”

Kirche turned away her face and, urging Tabitha to move along, walked away. As he watched that scene, Colbert let out a lonely sigh.

Returning to the laboratory, he sat down in a chair.

Colbert went into deep thought for a while… he unlocked the drawer of the desk that was covered by a lot of things, using the key that was hanging by a string from his neck.

In that drawer there was a small box. He took it out and opened the lid.

There was a small red ruby ring shining like a fire inside of it.

If one concentrated, he would be able to see a flickering flame inside the precious stone.

As he looked at that flame, the memories of the incident from twenty years ago were resurrected. The memories of that scene were imprinted into his mind; even now the colors were vivid. In that clear, glittering flame… Colbert was blaming himself. In just a moment, he remembered everything he had forgotten….

After that, Colbert looked around the inside of the laboratory. It was a small house with a shabby exterior, but he liked it much more than the mansion and property he had inherited from his ancestors and of which he himself had disposed of. The walls were covered by various tools and flasks he had obtained over time.

As he gazed at them, Colbert suddenly crumbled as if in pain.

“The Fire’s purpose… isn’t only destruction…”

Chapter Two: Cattleya

Noon, two days after leaving the academy...

Saito and the rest reached the La Vallière territory. However, by the time they would reach the mansion of La Vallière it would already be late at night. Upon hearing the words “late at night”... Saito turned pale. He realized that this “territory” was nothing more than a courtyard.

However, after half a day spent traveling, he could not possibly understand how something this big could be a residence’s garden.

By Japanese standards, Louise’s territory could be called a mid-sized city. A city... Saito had never heard of somebody possessing so much land before. These Upper Nobles were truly intimidating.

Louise’s status as a noble was truly displayed once they entered her territory.

They decided to take a break at an inn…

Once their carriages stopped, Siesta, who arrived just a bit earlier, quickly got out of her carriage. Having been trained as a maid, she went to open the coach's door for Louise.

“Uwaa, I can’t believe Siesta just did that... without any protesting,” thought Saito as he walked towards Louise’s carriage. But before he could get there, he was knocked down by a crowd of villagers running from the inn.

The villagers removed their hats in front of Louise, who had just stepped down.

“Miss Eléonore! Miss Louise!” they cried while deeply bowing down.

The villagers thought that even Saito, who was now lying in the dirt, was a noble. They quickly helped him up apologizing for their terrible manners.

“No, I’m not a noble…” Saito nervously tried to explain.

“Even so, you must be Miss Louise’s or Miss Eléonore’s attendant. And we cannot disrespect that.”

The plain looking farmers said while nodding.

They went on saying things like “Let me carry your sword for you,” and “It must have been a tiring journey to get here, huh?” as they treated Saito with the utmost kindness.

“We will be resting here for a moment. Please inform the family of our arrival,” commanded Eléonore.

A young boy quickly jumped onto a horse and rode off in order to report this.

They walked into the inn. Once Eléonore and Louise approached the table, chairs were immediately pulled out for them to sit on. The two sat down as if it were second nature. Saito tried to sit next to them, only to be given a demeaning glare by Eléonore.

“Saito-san! Saito-san!”

Hearing Siesta call, Saito turned around.

“Commoners are not permitted to sit at the same tables as nobles.”

That reminded Saito. Recently, he had been sitting next to Louise without worrying. Nevertheless, it was a strange thing to do in this world. Come to think, at first, Louise made Saito sit on the floor.

Louise opened her mouth to say something, but was cut off by a glare from Eléonore. Louise could do nothing but sit in her chair like a good girl. Saito stared wide-eyed – it was the first time he saw Louise in such a state. She really looked naturally obedient in front of her older sister. She must be a really scary elder sister to make Louise seem so weak.

“Oh, how Louise has grown!"

"She’s growing more and more beautiful!”

The villagers were chattering around them.

“It seems Miss Eléonore has been engaged, right?” someone muttered.

“SHHH! Don’t talk about that!” someone else scolded.

Eléonore’s eyebrows started to twitch and her expression darkened. The atmosphere in the inn took a plunge. Apparently, the topic of Eléonore’s engagement was definitely something to be avoided.

The commoners, feeling the murderous intent coming from Eléonore, didn’t dare speak another word. Saito and Siesta exchanged glances. Then Siesta quietly got close to Saito and grasped his hand. She was afraid.

Not noticing the change in her elder sister, Louise spoke.

“Eléonore. Eléonore nee-sama...”

“What…”

“Congratulations on your engagement!”

The face of every commoner fell, and a deep sigh escaped from them.

Once again, Louise had completely misread the atmosphere. All of a sudden, Eléonore’s eyebrows shot up as she pinched Louise’s cheek.

“It hwwuuuurrtsss!! Waaahhhhh! Nee-shammaaa!! Whhyy?! It hwurts it hwurts it hwurts!!!”

“You don’t know? You speak of it even though you know you shouldn’t!”

“I won’t whoh wah ur alking awout!!”

“The engagement has been canceled!! C-A-N-C-E-L-E-D!”

“W-why?”

“Who knows? Why don’t you ask Earl Burgandi? He said something about reaching his limit. ...I can’t understand why.”

Saito completely sympathized with this Earl Burgandi. Yes. It was understandable that anybody who listened to her would soon reach their “limit”. Eléonore was much fiercer and abusive than Louise. The Earl must have thought he didn’t have the stamina.

In the end, being unhappy with the marriage cancellation, Eléonore just vented all of her anger on Louise…

And so, the preaching started. She scolded Louise for blowing the roof of the carriage. Louise’s stretched cheek became very red and swollen by then. Naturally, Saito felt sorry for Louise.

However, the reprimanding didn’t last very long, because the door suddenly opened and a flow of pink blew in<!>.

A girl, wearing an elegant dress around her slim waist and a wide rimmed hat with a feather on top, had entered. Under the hat was a flow of silky pink blond hair – exactly the same as Louise’s.

Surprisingly, a lovely face popped up from under the hat.

Although from the first look it was obvious that she was older, she looked very cute. Such a beautiful face was beyond description. Her eye color and the way her eyes sparkled was the same as Louise’s as well. Noticing Eléonore, the girl stared at her with wide eyes.

“Ah! I’m so glad I noticed the strange carriage outside and came over here to take a look. I didn’t think I would meet you! Eléonore nee-sama! You’re back?”

“Cattle...ya...” Eléonore muttered.

Noticing the sudden guest, Louise looked up. Seeing Louise, Cattleya’s face radiated a happiness which was mirrored on Louise’s face as well.

“Big sister!”

“Louise! No way! You are not my Little Louise anymore! You came back as well!”

Louise stood up and launched herself into Cattleya's chest.

“It’s been so long, big sister!”

Unable to control their excitement, the two hugged with a squeal.

It seems like Cattleya was Louise’s sister. She had the same hair color, the same eye color – it was like looking at an older Louise. However, Cattleya’s face seemed to have a more calm and placid look than Louise’s. This aura of complete calmness and tenderness coming from Cattleya made Saito’s heart race.

She was like a matured Louise, with added gentleness. Besides, her beautiful figure and breasts matched Saito’s tastes well.

Cattleya's mouth half opened as she finally noticed Saito.

“Ah, ah, ah , ahah!”

While Saito was wondering what this "Ah" might mean, Cattleya approached him and gazed at his face.

“W-w-what’s wrong?” Saito asked nervously.

Cattleya began to gently stroke Saito’s face. Saito almost fainted from the sensation.

“You are... Louise’s lover, right?”

“Huh?!”

Siesta, who was standing right next to Saito, suddenly turned cold. She stomped down on his foot. Hard. Saito jumped up.

Louise blushed furiously.

“He’s just my familiar! Not my lover!”

“Ah... is that so?”

Cattleya giggled and tilted her head with a sweet smile.

“I’m sorry, I got it wrong. Don’t worry about it.”

Everybody got onto Cattleya’s carriage for the remainder of the ride to the La Vallière household. Eléonore was obviously discontented with having to sit with a commoner and a familiar. But when Cattleya jokingly said, “The more the merrier right?” Eléonore, though still not uttering a single word, reluctantly consented.

However... Saito and the rest weren’t the only passengers in the large carriage.

It was just like a zoo inside the carriage.

In front of the seats, a tiger was lying sprawled on the floor, yawning. Louise sat down next to a bear. Various kinds of dogs and cats were scattered here and there. A huge snake, which was hanging down from the ceiling, appeared right before Siesta’s face, making her faint. While looking after the fainted Siesta, Saito muttered,

“What a wonderful carriage…”

“Big sister loves animals,” said Louise.

Although he thought that this kind of love was taking it too far, Saito did not say a thing.

“I recently picked up a thrush.”

Cattleya said in a happy voice.

“Show me! Show me!” Louise was frolicking like a child.

Eléonore and the others took a collective deep sigh.

This was the life of the three beautiful La Vallière sisters. Saito took a deep sympathetic bow towards Louise’s older sister.

Louise and Cattleya continued having a long chat between them.

It seemed like the second eldest sister, who was wearing those lovely clothes,

was good friends with Louise. When you see two people getting along like this, even a tedious journey like this doesn't feel boring. Siesta was already sleeping peacefully on his lap. On the left of the coach, hills stretched. On the right – cultivated fields extended. As the rye harvest was ending, straw was piled up here and there. When he was looking at such tranquil scenery, it was impossible to believe that a war was going on. Leaning into the window frame, adjusting Derflinger behind his back, Saito took a deep yawn.

In the late night...

Eléonore took a pocket watch out of her pocket and confirmed the time.

A castle came into the view, right behind the hill. Because there was nothing around it, it actually looked bigger than Tristain‘s royal palace.

"Could that be-” Saito whispered. Louise nodded.

It looked like every castle. Surrounded by high walls and deep canals. Pinnacles were towering above walls. It was indeed a splendid, big, and true castle.

Siesta, who was sleeping up till now, woke up, and noticing the castle, stared at it with wide eyes.

“Wow! Amazing!”

At that moment, a large owl leaped in through the window and landed on Saito’s head.

“Welcome home, Eléonore-sama, Cattleya-sama, Louise-sama.” Owl bowed, greeting them.

“T-t-the o-owl talked and bowed! B-bowed!”. Siesta fainted again. Although he came from a different world, Saito did not seem to be surprised by the talking owl and didn't move. Saito wasn't surprised by such things anymore.

Cattleya smiled.

“And where is Mother?”

“Mistress is waiting for everyone in the dining room.”

“What about Father?"

Louise asked anxiously.

“Master hasn’t returned yet.”

Because the most essential member was missing, Louise frowned in displeasure. Coming here to obtain her father's permission to participate in the war was pointless without him.

One could see gates behind the canal.

When the carriage stopped, the sounds of chains holding the drawbridge being loosened could be heard from both of the gigantic statue-shaped gateposts.

Each stone statue was at least twenty feet tall. Though these golems were created only as gate ornaments, they made the whole drawbridge look spectacular.

Once the drawbridge finished lowering, the carriage began to move again, crossing the drawbridge and advancing into the rampart.

Saito’s surprise about the luxuries of Louise’s family was renewed again. It was a large noble’s castle.

Saito and the others arrived at the dining room which was generously decorated by a lot of luxurious furniture. Though Siesta immediately went to the servant's quarters, Saito, as Louise’s familiar, was allowed to accompany them for dinner.

However, he was forced to wait behind Louise's chair. So Saito stood guard behind Louise, watching the table that was about 30 feet long.

Although it was just four people that sat on seats during this supper, 20 servants were queuing up around the table.

And, in spite of the fact that it was midnight, Louise’s mother, the Duchess of La Vallière, was waiting for her daughters to arrive to the dining table.

The Duchess, who occupied the top seat, looked over at her arriving daughters.

Saito flinched from that power. Even though Eléonore possessed a violent, high-handed aura which pressed Saito, Louise's mother was just as impressive.

And it was just a mother’s hospitality towards her daughters.

She seemed to be around fifty years of age. However, this guessing was made by calculating the eldest sister's age. In reality, she didn’t look over forty. She had a very sharp appearance. Louise and Cattleya’s pink hair color seemed to come from their mother. The duchess had tied her charming pink hair together on the head. This person was wearing a commanding aura around her, Saito felt pressed.

Louise, despite meeting her mother after such a long time, was acting tense. It seems like Louise trusted only Cattleya.

“Mother, we have returned just now.” Eléonore said; Duchess of La Vallière nodded.

When the three sisters seated themselves, waiters carried the appetizers and the dinner started.

For Saito, who was standing behind, time was passing very slowly. No words were uttered. The food being served here far outshone even a formal dinner at the academy. The only sounds coming from the dining room were the sounds of silver forks and knives.

Breaking this silence, Louise said.

“M-mother-sama.”

The duchess did not answer. Eléonore did.

“Mother-sama! Tell Louise! This foolish child said that she wants to go to a war!”

Bam! – Louise stood up, hitting the table.

“I am not a fool! Why am I a fool for applying to Her Majesty’s military forces?”

“Aren’t you a girl?! War is men’s business!”

“That’s a very old-fashioned way of thinking! This is now an age when women and men are given equal positions! If positions were only given to boys in the Academy, even you, older sister, would not be able to become a chief researcher at the Academy!”

Eléonore shook her head in amazement.

“Do you know what kind of place a battlefield is? It is not where woman and children like you should go.”

“But Her Majesty trusts me…”

“You are trusted? You – the ‘Zero’?!”

Louise bit her lip. *Henrietta is taking me to the battlefield because I am necessary. I am a "Void" user. However, I can't tell my family that.* So Louise was not able to say anything at all and fell silent.

Eléonore tried to continue preaching, but was cut off by the duchess who quietly stayed silent up till now. She commanded in a haughty voice,

“Eat, Eléonore.”

“B-but Mother-sama...”

“We’ll talk about Louise tomorrow, when father comes back.”

And so the discussion ended.

Saito, in a room prepared for him, was lying on the bed and looking at the

ceiling.

In this storage room, a broom leaned against the wall and a dust cloth was on the bed. Saito learned anew about the difference between his and Louise’s status. Recently, they slept in the same bed, lived in the same attic and they ate from the same table, yet he couldn't feel any difference in their status…

But when he met her family, it all started feeling like groundless fantasies.

Louise is beautiful. Rich. A noble, so to speak.

Also, Saito recalled that they did not speak with Louise once they left school. Louise lost her nerve because of Eléonore and did not talk much. In fact, she took all the preaching of her family, like a servant from their master, without complaining. For some reason, she hid her true self.

He felt pity for her.

He was no one, he had nothing to do with this world's social system.

But... after seeing such a dinner in this castle – you just can’t help but wonder about it, right? He thought.

He felt like he learned the huge difference between his and Louise’s positions.

He was feeling a bit down because of that...

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

Who could be coming to this storage room? He thought while opening the door, only to be greeted by the shy smile of Siesta, who stood there.

“Siesta?”

“W-well… I couldn’t fall asleep, so I came here.”

“Eh? Eeeh?”

While Saito was panicking, Siesta entered the room.

“Even so… how did you know where I was?”

“I asked the servants where Saito-san is staying.”

“Is that so…”

Siesta sat down on his bed, idly swinging her legs. For some reason, her face was red. When Saito tried to pass her, Siesta grabbed his arm and pulled him down to sit next to her. Then, she rested her head against his shoulder, just like in the carriage a while ago.

“Siesta?”

Hearing him ask, Siesta innocently looked up at him.

“This is the first time I've come into such a wonderful castle. This castle is a real maze.”

“It’s great.”

“A friend at the academy kept telling me that the La Vallière family is one of the five most distinguished families in Tristain. To be living in such a castle, with titles, riches and good looks… Miss Vallière can only be envied.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. It’s a very secure life. One can get whatever one wishes for, like…”

Then Siesta looked into Saito’s face.

“…Saito-san.”

“I-I am not her property. I am her familiar…”

“I understand.”

Siesta said slowly.

“Eh?”

“The way Saito-san looks at her, I understand. I do not have a winning chance. She is rich, she is a noble and she is beautiful… and has such a big castle as a home. *Hic*”

Siesta turned her face down, looking lonely. Trying to understand what she just said, Saito became silent as well.

“Hiccup, hiccup.” Siesta sounded like she was sobbing. Was she crying?

While Saito was at a loss what to do, Siesta suddenly stood up.

“Siesta…”

“But...”

“Eh?”

“I have something too.”

“Siesta?”

Somehow the situation changed. With a new resolve that seemed to say "I won’t give up on Saito-san!," Siesta turned around.

“My b-b-b-breasts definitely beat Miss Vallière’s! Hiccup!”

“S-Siesta?”

Shaking with anger, Siesta continued talking.

“N-n-noble family? So what? I am a maid. A maid! Hiccup!”

“Y-yes, I know.”

Saito noticed that Siesta continued hiccuping many times, over and over again.

“Siesta, could you be… drunk?”

“I made dinner alone. And they didn't even say ‘You had a long journey, thank you, please take some rest.’ Hiccup!”

Not only was her face brightly red, but she also smelled of alcohol. Saito was dumbfounded. It was the first time he saw Siesta drunk.

Indeed, since she had to fulfill her duties as a maid here as well, Siesta had to

entertain and serve alcohol in this castle. Drunk, Siesta took out a bottle of wine from the crevice of her shirt.

“W-where did you get the bottle from?”

Siesta brought her face close to Saito.

“Stole it.”

“I, I see.”

Siesta drew out the cork and immediately drank from the bottle. Wide-eyed, Saito stared at her gulping it down.

“Phua!” Siesta separated her mouth from the bottle. Her face became even more red.

“Hey, Saito!”

At last she was calling him informally.

“Y-yes?”

“You also must drink.”

“Cheers.”

He knew that if he disobeyed, her mood would go foul. Saito took the offered wine. He tried to take it down in one gulp, and with a “Buaagh,” quickly spit it out. *W-what was wrong with this wine? It was really strong stuff.*

“S-siesta. This wine…”

“It was on a kitchen table.”

Seems like Siesta was the type whose mood increased after one glass of wine, and one gulp from the bottle on the table was enough to make theft look okay. Siesta was an indescribably bad drinker.

“Y-you shouldn’t have taken it without permission…”

“Hey! Saito!”

“Y-yes?”

“Whatever. Drink!”

“C-cheers.”

Remembering that the mood might change to a raging one if he refused, Saito reluctantly drank the wine again.

Meanwhile...

In Cattleya’s room, Louise had her hair combed by her older sister.

Cattleya's room was an elegant mix between a botanical garden and zoo. Potted plants were placed all around, a lot of poultry baskets were hanging from the ceiling, and puppies were running around the room.

Cattleya gently combed Louise’s hair.

“Louise, Little Louise. Your hair is so charming, it has such a beautiful color.”

“Big sister, you have the same hair.”

Cattleya laughed happily.

“Oh well. Your hair – I like it.”

Louise pouted and muttered,

“Big sister Eléonore’s blond hair color is the same as father’s, I think.”

“Well, I asked big sister Eléonore about that. She was offended.”

“Right. I don’t think big sister Eléonore matches her fair hair."

“Huh, why?”

“She is mean. She's a different older sister. Even though it's been a long time, she keeps on bullying me.”

“It’s because you, Louise, are so cute. So cute that it makes one worry. It's her way of caring. “

“That’s not true.”

Cattleya slowly embraced Louise tightly from the back.

“It is true. Everyone in this house loves you, Little Louise.”

“Saying such a thing, big sister...”

Cattleya buried her face in Louise’s hair and closed her eyes.

“But I'm so glad, Louise. I thought that you would become completely depressed…”

“Why?”

“Viscount Wardes. He was a traitor, right? Half a year ago, he was a magical guard leader. Wardes's mansion was attached to our territory. When he betrayed you, weren't you hurt?”

Louise shook her head.

“Not really. I am not a child anymore. Don’t confuse a childish crush for love."

Cattleya smiled when Louise said so firmly.

“You are reliable. You've grown up, Louise.”

“That's right,” Louise muttered to herself.

“I am not a child anymore, therefore, I want to make decisions for myself.”

“Then, if father were to oppose it, would you go to war without his permission?”

“If it's possible, I want him to agree. I want everyone to understand me.”

“However, I do not feel admiration for the war either.”

“Our mother country is in crisis. And, Princess… no, Her Majesty, needs my powers. Therefore…”

“It is useless to say that to me. It is difficult for me to understand, for your elder sister always shuts herself in the castle. “

Cattleya gently patted Louise's head. Then, she had a strong coughing fit.

“Big sister! Are you all right?”

Louise watched Cattleya with a worried expression. Louise’s second elder sister’s body was weak. She had never taken more than one step out of La Vallière territory.

“Did you call a doctor?”

Cattleya nodded.

“The local doctor was called, and even though he tried to cast powerful ‘Water’ spells many times, magic is useless against this sickness. Nothing is good for such a body. The touch of water flow is useless.”

The cause of Cattleya’s sickness was unknown. Even if the sickened part of her body was treated with medicine or magic, another part would start to degenerate. Eventually, all doctors failed against such a cycle. Her symptoms were currently relieved by various medicines and magics.

Despite all that, Cattleya still smiled. Louise felt pity for her elder sister. Because of her condition, Cattleya could not get into the magic academy, even though she could cast magic. She also could not marry, despite being so beautiful.

“Hmmm, why such a long face? I lead a rather happy life everyday. Look!”

Cattleya pointed at the bird cage.

There was a bird shut inside. A small bandage was rolled around the wing.

“Look, it is the young bird that I talked about in the carriage a while ago. I picked it up recently.”

“C-cute.”

“This young bird was badly hurt. Her wing was wounded. I was passing by when I heard the pain in this young bird's voice. I stopped the carriage and picked it up.”

It seemed that Cattleya, while she was in the forest, heard the cry of the bird, so she stopped the carriage and picked it up.

“Big sister! It is just a bird!"

“Don’t you feel the same about your familiar?”

Cattleya smiled knowingly. Louise’s cheeks flamed up in an instant. *I do not understand what I feel about Saito. Is it because he is a human?*

“So you understand me. This young bird is the same.”

Cattleya said, pointing.

“Really?”

“Yes. I’m happy that you've already reached the age of falling in love.”

Even Louise’s ears turned red.

“What are you talking about?! I didn’t fall in love!”

“It is useless to hide it from me. I understand everything.”

“I am not in love. Really!”

Being very embarrassed, Louise shook her head, and was on the verge of tears.

“Don’t make such a fuss. I understand everything. Then, shall we sleep together after such a long time?”

Still blushing, Louise nodded, biting her lips.

On a soft bed, Louise, with her clothes taken off and only in her underwear, drew closer to her elder sister. Cattleya, in her nightclothes as well, embraced Louise tightly like a kitten.

Louise placed her face next to Cattleya's chest and gave out a deep sigh.

“What's wrong, Louise?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

After Cattleya’s words, Louise muttered hesitatingly.

“I wonder if mine will grow as big as big sister’s.”

“Pfft,” Cattleya giggled. Then she started groping Louise’s chest.

“Hyaah!”

Louise yelped. Ignoring her screams, Cattleya kept on touching.

“All right. Don’t worry. It will grow big soon.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I was like you at first too.”

Louise tried to remember. *Cattleya is 24 now… so she was sixteen, eight years ago. And I was eight. Did Cattleya look the same as I am at that time?* She could not recall clearly, because she had been too young then.

Come to think of it, Cattleya always embraced her when they slept, during those old times. *I couldn’t stand sleeping by myself and couldn’t fall asleep alone.* Carrying her pillow and going to Cattleya’s bed, while listening to elder sister's stories and breathing in her scent… she always calmed down and fell asleep.

In Cattleya’s embrace, her eyes closed by themselves…

Various thoughts started coming to her head.

Henrietta.

War against Albion.

Possible death.

Coming home to ask permission for what may end up being her death. A heavy load on her shoulders.

The cruel and valuable lessons that she learned day by day.

And, when she was thinking about her familiar, for some reason, Louise’s cheeks started to burn. They hardly talked today. Because she was being scolded by Eléonore, they could not talk. But now when she started to think about these things, she could not fall asleep at all.

She started squirming restlessly…

“What’s wrong? Can’t fall asleep?”

“Ye-yes…” she muttered embarrassed.

“Fufufu. You cannot fall asleep next to me already. Who are you thinking about, child?”

“N-no one! Really!”

“Is it the boy that you brought with you a little while ago?”

“Wrong! He’s just a familiar! I don’t love him!”

“Hmmm. I didn’t say that you loved someone.”

Louise hid within the futon.

“I hate you, big sister.”

“Oh dear, now I am hated.”

Cattleya laughed happily.

“But it’s all right. If a child cannot sleep next to the elder sister, then it is not a compliment for the sister. In fact, she should be embarrassed instead.”

“Uuuuuh…” Louise groaned.

“See you soon. This is where you can be yourself.”

Louise, rolled up in a blanket, walked through the corridor. On the way, she asked the servants where Saito was staying. It was at the end of an adjoined corridor behind the guest room, a place where the cleaning tools were stored.

She took a deep breath once she found the storage room. *It is not because I want to meet him*, She tried to persuade herself. *I am a mage. If the familiar is not around, I just become insecure. Really, nothing more. We haven‘t talked all day long today. And if you do not talk even a little, the familiar will feel bad*, she thought.

“Really, nothing else.” Louise muttered opening the storage room doors, her face dyed bright red.

However, it was Siesta who sat there on the bed.

“Huh? Miss Vallière.”

Her cheeks were crimson red. And in her hand, she held a bottle of wine.

“W-w-what are you doing in here?”

Confused, Louise asked.

“I came here to have fun.” Siesta answered.

Then she saw Saito behind the bed. He let out a loud “Guah.” It seemed like he

got drunk, collapsed and fell asleep.

“Get out of my room.”

Louise said, emanating all her pride.

“This is not Miss Vallière’s room.”

Siesta answered back.

“It is my house.”

Louise indomitably glared at Siesta. They both stared at each other, not backing off. Both ready to burst into a flaming rage.

When drunk, Siesta was very strong-willed and daring. She could snap back even to Louise. Alarmed and agitated, she declared to Louise,

“I am a housemaid employed by the school. I am not employed by Miss Vallière. Besides, we are on vacation anyway. It is up to us on how we use our free time. So please, do not disturb us.”

It was absurd. Louise rudely approached the bed, and tried to drag the sleeping Saito by his ankle. Then Siesta grasped his other foot...

“Let go!”

“You let go!”

“Well excuse me, but this fellow happens to be my familiar. In other words, he is mine.”

Siesta glared at Louise with eyes full of hostility. She wasn’t listening to what Louise said.

“…Are you disobeying a noble?”

Suddenly, the air in the room became tense.

Siesta, with a jerk, drank more wine.

And muttered in a small voice.

“Noblenoblenoble, shut up.”

“Haa? You l-l-lout….”

The moment when Louise shouted…Siesta brought her face next to the young noble.

“It's love, isn’t it? In short, you are just jealous. Despite you being a noble... How ridiculous!”

“Wha-wha…”

In an instant, her resolution was washed away and Louise panicked.

“Have you confessed? Are you just jealous of my love?”

Siesta continued pressing Louise into a corner.

“Ah, auuh... uuh…”

Mumbled Louise, blushing.

“What? You haven’t confessed? Coward.”

“Uuh…”

Strangely powerful now, Siesta made Louise to retreat completely.

“But the most important thing to Saito-san…”

“Wha-what?! What are you talking about?!”

“He likes girls with big chests.”

This made Louise to stop at once, at a complete loss of words.

“And when you think about it, you don’t have much of a bust.”

Siesta primly poked Louise's chest.

“B-breasts.”

“Let’s call things the way they are – you are flat as a board, a board!"

“Uuh,” Louise let out a strangled cry.

She remembered Saito’s glances. *Weren’t that stupid familiar’s glances always aimed at the valley of the breasts?*

“Saito-san said it himself. Miss Vallière's breast size is the same as a kid’s.”

With drunken bravery, Siesta declared an unexpected thing.

Firmly biting her lips, Louise dashed out of the room.

After making sure she had left, Siesta laid down next to Saito and fell asleep.

Cattleya was surprised to see Louise coming back to the room in tears.

"Oh, what’s wrong, Louise? What happened?”

“Fueh…” Louise threw herself into Cattleya's chest.

“It’s all right... why are you crying?”

However, Louise just kept on sobbing, not saying a word.

“Fuuh,” Cattleya sighed deeply.

Just like during old times, Cattleya kept on patting Louise’s head until she fell asleep.

Saito woke up and was instantly surprised. It was because Siesta had been

sleeping next to him.

“Uuhn, uuhn,” she seemed in pain in her sleep. *Siesta, why she is next to me…* he wondered, but, after seeing a bottle of wine lying on the floor, he remembered.

“Oh no, I got drunk and, after that…”

I was forced to drink a strong, distilled liquor by Siesta and collapsed.

“Siesta, Siesta,” he lightly tapped her cheek.

However, she didn’t wake up.

“Uuh, uguu, mguu.”

It made Saito worried as she was holding her chest as if choking. She was wearing a shirt too small for her. Had she borrowed underwear from someone in the castle? Really, when you wear a shirt whose size doesn't match your body and you also have a hangover, you must feel very bad. Saito loosened a button on Siesta's shirt.

Thereupon Siesta slowly opened her eyes. Saito hastily removed his hand from her shirt.

“Go-*yawn*-good morning…”

Siesta muttered with a still drowsy face, but in a instant it turned into a blush once she noticed her surroundings.

“S-Saito-san, why? That! I!”

Hey hey, weren’t you the one who broke into my room all drunk in the first place? Saito smiled wryly.

“Siesta, last night, you got drunk and…”

Saito said, increasing the blush on Siesta’s face even further.

“Eh? I got drunk?”

“Yes. Look!”

Saito pointed at the bottle of wine lying on the floor.

“You brought it with you.”

“I drank wiiiiine?!”

“Ye-yes…”

“Which reminds me, during dinner, I drank one glass. But it seems like I took more than just one sip. Ahh, what to do…”

Saito was surprised by Siesta’s worry.

“Siesta?”

“I..I really did it, didn't I?”

“Y-yes.”

“I think I drank too much. I’m not very good at drinking wine.”

Averting her face, Siesta muttered awkwardly. Indeed, you were drunk, Saito agreed. Seems like this maid was inclined to drunken frenzy.

“After drinking all that wine, I don’t have any memories of last night. Was I rude, Saito-san?”

“No, not particularly…”

Saito shook his head.

That moment… a sound of someone running noisily through the corridor could be heard. *Bam* The door opened and one of the castle’s housemaids jumped in.

“W-w-wha-!” Saito shouted.

“No time! Master has arrived! We need to keep the castle sparkling…” she shouted, and with an armful of cleaning tools, she ran out. Soon, another employee came and dashed out with a mop and bucket. It was a storage room after all. Though there were a lot of cleaning tools, they were almost never used. However, it seemed that today was an exception.

Master? Siesta and Saito looked at each other.

In short, Louise's father had returned.

Chapter Three: Duke of La Vallière

At the break of dawn in the castle's garden, there was a giant cage with dragons at each of its four corners.

The servants that had gathered in the surrounding area simultaneously took off the wheels of the cage-like carriage. Footmen caught the dragons and, at the given opportunity, the servants opened the carriage door. A red carpet spread out all the way to the cage's entrance in order to accept a middle aged noble.

It was Duke of La Vallière. He was more than fifty years old. He had blonde hair and a beard that were both turning white, and he was dressed in wonderful clothes suitable for a king. On his left eye he had a monocle, and his eyes had a strong glitter to them.

The butlers walked briskly to the duke, took off his hat, fixed his hair and made sure that his robe was properly lined.

The Duke inquired in a bitter baritone voice, "Has Louise returned?"

Jerome, a butler who had served the La Vallière family for many years, bowed respectfully,

"She returned last night," he answered.

"Call her for breakfast!"

"Certainly!"

The mood in the La Vallière family as they had breakfast on the sunlit balcony was the same as usual. The table was drawn out in order to have breakfast in the sunlight, everyone was seated. Duke of La Vallière was seated in the seat of honor and next to him was his wife. And the unusually concentrated three sisters were sitting at the table, lined up by age. Louise's body was a bit unstable,

because she had cried so much last night. Even though she was supposed to get her father’s permission to participate in the war...

It appeared that the Duke was in a considerably bad mood.

“Damn that bird-brained idiot!”

At the beginning of his speech, the Duke insulted the Cardinal.

“What is the matter?”

Changing her facial expression, the Duke’s wife asked her husband. After her father’s first words, Louise knew this wasn’t the moment to ask.

“After calling me all the way to Tristainia, I was wondering what he was going to say to me... 'Organize one army corps,' he said! Don’t joke around with me!”

“Did you agree?”

“Like hell I would! I already retired from military service! Why doesn’t he command the soldier that took my place and let me stay with my family! Moreover, I’m against this war!”

“That’s true. But, is that fine? Didn’t the Cardinal’s official notice state that right now, the fatherland has to unite in order to defeat our bitter enemy? A rumor that the La Vallière family is treacherous will spread, which will affect our social life as well.”

As she was saying that, the Duke’s wife had an extremely cool face.

“You shouldn’t call a bird-brained idiot like that a 'Cardinal.' 'Idiot' is more than enough. Even more, to take advantage of such a young queen...”

Louise coughed and spewed the bread she was eating. Eléonore glared at Louise.

“Oh, how scary. Sorry for making you hear the truth about the court’s sparrow.”

“By all means, feel free to let us hear what you think.”

Louise who had been quiet up to that point opened her lips while trembling,

“There is something I’d like to inquire of Father.”

The Duke watched Louise intently.

“Of course it’s fine, but before that, won’t you give your father, who you haven’t seen in a while, a little kiss, Louise?”

Louise stood up and approached her father, and after that gave him a kiss on the cheek. After that, she stared directly at her father and asked:

“Why is Father opposing my decision to join the war?”

“Because this war is a huge mistake.”

“It is a war against Albion, who invaded us in the first place. What is wrong with ambushing them?”

“Attacking them from the side isn’t something I would call an 'ambush.' Look here!”

The Duke manipulated the plate and food on it and started explaining to Louise.

“The thing you call an 'ambush' is having a military force so overwhelming that it can succeed from the first time. The enemy’s army is about fifty thousand. Our army, together with Germania’s, is sixty thousand.”

Moving the knives and forks, with the help of the meat’s fragments, the Duke created a simulation of the war.

“Doesn’t our army have ten thousand more men?”

“If the attacking army was three times as big as the defending army, it would be a certain victory. Because their sky forces have been organized and they have good positions, with this number it will become a difficult battle."

“But...”

The Duke peered into Louise’s face.

“Our siege is excellent. We will blockade that annoying continent from the sky and then just wait until it runs out of resources. If we do that, eventually they’ll

come asking for peace. The conclusion of the war will come just like that, just like blending white and black. However, what are you going to do if the ambush fails? The possibility for that isn't small."

Louise was silent. Every single thing her father had said was a good argument.

"Because of the victory at Tarbes we've grown overconfident. Overconfidence leads to negligence. To make matters worse, taking the Academy of Magic's pupils along as officers? I can only say that that is stupid. What can kids do? In war, you know, you can't say you are strong enough just because you have greater numbers. Ambushing is an act that means you have absolute confidence that you will achieve victory from the first attempt. There is no way I'd let my daughter enter such a war."

"Father..."

After the Duke finished saying that, he stood up.

"Now then, breakfast is finished."

Louise bit her lips and stood still for a while.

"Louise. From here on out you are under house arrest. You won't be allowed to leave this castle until the war is over."

"Wait!" Louise shouted.

"What? I told you that the talk is over."

"Louise... you..."

Eleonore pulled on Louise's hem. Cattleya was watching Louise worriedly.

"To the Princess... no, to Her Majesty, I am a necessity."

"What do you mean when you say that she needs you? Your ability with magic is..."

Louise couldn't tell her family that she was the bearer of the Void.

"Right now, Right now I can't say, but... I..."

Louise hesitated, but she brought up a triumphant face.

“I am no longer the me from the past!”

“Louise! What are you saying to Father?!”

Eléonore said with an intense voice.

“Big Sister, you be quiet! Right now, I’m leading a conversation!”

All the family members were surprised by Louise’s attitude. The Louise from the past would never go up against her sister in such a manner.

“I have always been treated like an idiot. I always felt regret when I was being compared to my sisters and was told that I have no talent in Magic. But, but, now it’s different. I was clearly told by Her Majesty that I am necessary to her.”

With those words, the color of the Duke’s eyes changed. He turned towards Louise, went down on his knee and peered into his daughter’s eyes.

“...You have finally realized what your dominant Element is?”

Louise nodded confidently.

“Which of the four?”

Louise thought for a while. Of course, she wouldn’t talk about the Void. But would it be ok to lie to her own Father? For a moment, Louise was troubled. And... opening her lips, she told a lie.

“... Fire.”

“Fire?”

For a little while, Duke of La Vallière gazed at Louise’s face and then he slowly nodded.

“You have the same Element as your grandfather. I see, Fire, hmm. ... In that case, it’s only natural that you would be attracted to war. It’s a sinful Element. Truly, an Element covered in sin.”

“Father...”

The Duke hung his head feebly.

“If I remember correctly, you said that Her Majesty needs your power, right?”

“Yes.”

“Listen, Louise. It’s an important thing. There is no mistake about it. When nobody else was around, Her Majesty told you that your power is necessary to her, right?”

Louise declared clearly.

“Yes. I was told by Her Majesty that my power is necessary to her.”

The elderly Duke shook his head.

“What a honorable thing. A terribly honorable thing. However... As I thought, there is no way for me to recognize this.”

“Father!”

“People can certainly make mistakes because of this thing called loyalty. I will report to Her Majesty myself. Jerome!”

“Yes.”

The butler jumped out and stood by the Duke’s side.

“Prepare paper and a pen.”

After that he turned towards Louise,

“You have to choose a son-in-law for me,” he declared.

“Huh? Why?”

“I can’t recognize your participation in the war. I absolutely can’t recognize it. You’re probably in despair, because of that traitor Wardes, right? That’s why you need to choose a son-in-law for me. Also, calm down your heart, ok? You've told

me that you want to go to war twice now. This is an order. No changes are allowed.”

“Father!”

Louise shouted. However, the elderly Duke shook his head.

“Jerome, don’t let Louise out of the castle. Understand?”

“Certainly!”

The butler nodded.

Then, the Duke left his breakfast seat.

His wife and the elder sisters that were left behind surrounded Louise.

Her mother and bossy sister criticized Louise.

“Father isn’t young anymore. Don’t worry him so much.”

“Because you worried Father so much, now you have to choose a husband.”

Eléonore declared coldly.

“Why do I have to?! According to the order, Eléonore-nee-sama must...”

As she was saying that Eléonore stretched Louise’s cheeks.

“I-I’m sowwy... Vut, to me, berrege is fill...(marriage is still)...”

“Why? For what reason? You have a lover, right?”

Having been told that by her mother, Louise shook her head.

“I don’t have. I don’t. There is no such person.”

The Duke’s wife and Eléonore seemed to have noticed something because of Louise’s expression. The two exchanged glances.

“It seems you’re thinking of someone.”

“There’s no such person!”

“Who? From which noble house?”

“Count? Baron?”

“Honored Baron? You couldn’t... it can’t be a mere Chevalier, right?”

Louise’s body solidified.

“Oh no, this girl... I see, Chevalier or Order of Merit, I don’t know, but... she fell in love with a man with low social status.”

Eléonore’s face became bitter. The mother pressed down on her forehead.

“Ooh, it’s because I never really took proper care of this girl...”

“I-I didn’t fall in love with a Chevalier.”

Louise said in haste. The truth was he wasn’t even a Chevalier, but a simple Commoner. Even more, a Commoner that came from a completely different world... if they knew that, a simple sorry wouldn’t be even nearly enough of an apology. Even though she always repeated to herself that she didn’t really like him, right now her head was full of thoughts of Saito.

Cattleya was looking worriedly at Louise.

“No matter how old this girl gets, she will always worry us, won’t she? Not only does she want to join the war, but to make matters worse she has fallen in love with a Chevalier...”

“I said, I haven’t...”, and, she hesitated. Her mother and sister both shouted.

““Be quiet!””

It was the usual threatening attitude. After Louise used up the courage she used to talk back to her father earlier on, now she became completely dispirited.

Suddenly feeling sorrowful, Louise ran off.

“Hey! Wait right there!”

She heard the shouting voices of her mother and bossy sister.

The afternoon came. Because Saito didn’t have any more tasks, he laid down on the bed in the storage room and stared at the ceiling. As he looked around the room, while lying down on the bed, he noticed some off-white sheets placed upon a box, that were left there by him, and he felt a bit pained. Ever since he came to the La Vallière house, that was all his existence merited to. A small, meaningless existence.

Since Siesta had returned to her own room, Saito was all alone now. Just as he was absent-mindedly thinking what he should do, he realized that he hadn’t had any breakfast yet and he wasn’t going to get anything to eat unless he went and took something himself... at that moment came the sound of the castle’s servants running around the stone-paved corridors.

“Where? Have you found her?”

“No, not this way!” the voices were saying something like that. It seemed they were searching for someone.

Just as he was wondering who they were searching for, the door opened with a bang. Several young maids jumped in, held Saito down and started searching through the storage room.

“What the heck are you guys doing?!” Saito shouted. Stating, “Doesn’t seem to be here”, and ignoring him, the maids that held Saito down left the room.

“What the hell just happened?” as Saito thought to himself, this time there was a knock on the door.

“It’s open,” he said, but the knocking continued.

If it was Louise or Siesta, they’d immediately make a rude entrance as soon as he said that. Remembering that a person that, even after being told that he can, doesn’t open the door himself can’t be a bad person, Saito opened the door.

And there a woman, with pinkish blonde hair and reddish brown eyes, was standing.

For a moment he thought “Louise?” but it wasn’t. She was taller than Louise. She had kind eyes and a smiling face without even a bit of ill intent on it.

It was Cattleya.

“U, umm, that...”

While blushing, Saito looked at her with a confused look.

“Is it ok to come in?”

“Y-Yes! Please!”

With a respectful bow, Saito ushered her in.

“Sorry for intruding,” saying that, Cattleya stuck out her tongue at him.

She was so cute that Saito’s heart started racing. Naturally, he preferred Louise. However, because of her character, that wasn’t an expression that appeared on her face. He felt that you really had to hand it to this kind big sister.

With a feeling different from that towards Louise, he looked at Cattleya sitting down on the bed with a small devilish smile floating up on her face.

She gave off a sense different from Siesta’s “healthy” sex appeal.

It was also different from Henrietta’s sex appeal that was brought up by the balanced danger that came from the fact that she was of high class.

It differed from Kirche’s “shaking, almost violent” sex appeal as well.

Of course, it was also different from Louise’s “hard to break apart” sex appeal.

With a light smile, it was a sex appeal that felt as if it was wrapping you up.

Will Louise also become like this when she grows up? If that’s the case, then Louise is a definite “Buy,” huuh, while those thoughts were floating around his head, Cattleya seemed more and more charming.

“When Louise grows up, she won’t look like me, you know.”

Because she suddenly said that while laughing, Saito jumped up.

“Huh? No! I wasn’t!... I wasn’t thinking about stuff like that! Yes!”

“Is that so? But you definitely seemed like you were wondering if Louise is going to look like me in the future...”

Wow, what a sharp woman,

“Louise will definitely become even more charming when she grows up, so calm down. But she probably won’t become any taller.”

Thinking that it would be more than enough as long as she resembles her sister in the breast area, Saito kept opening and closing his lips.

“You, what’s your name?”

“It’s Saito. Yes.”

“My, what a lovely name, isn’t it?”

It was the first time he got his name praised since he came here.

“Hey, what kind of person are you? You’re not a person from Halkeginia, are you? Having said that, it feels more like you’re a completely different human from your very core. Are you?”

As he was being examined like that, Saito was surprised. *What’s this? She found out that I’m from a different world? Or more like, did Louise tell her?*

“Fufu. Your face is saying that you’re wondering how I know. But I understand you. It just seems that I am unusually sharp.”

“Y-Yeah...”

“But, things like that are of no importance. Thank you very much. Truly.”

“Huh?”

“Thank you for helping that selfish Louise all the time. There is no way that little girl would get Her Majesty’s recognition if she were alone. You definitely helped her along the way. That’s true, isn’t it?”

What would be a good answer? Or more like, how much should he tell her? Seeing Saito worried like that, Cattleya laughed lightly.

“There are things you can’t tell me, hmm. It’s fine. Now then... it’s regrettable, but I have to inform you.”

“Eh?”

“Louise’s talk with Father didn’t go well. Because of that, she was told that she has to find a husband. And she then disappeared off somewhere.”

“Really?”

So the servants that barged in earlier on were searching for Louise. Saito said, “Achaa...” and covered his face.

“Father wants Louise to get married. That girl is troubled as well. And just after a while back her fiancé turned out to be a traitor, now she has to get another engagement. Even though she’s still so young.”

Cattleya muttered as if she had completely no relation.

Saito shivered in pain. Louise is going to get married? After the matter with Wardes, those words hurt him really deeply. They were words he didn’t want to hear a second time.

“You don’t like it, right? The fact that Louise is getting married.”

Cattleya muttered with an angelic smile.

Saito shook his head.

“Th-That sort of thing... is fine. I can’t think much of Louise in the first place. Because Louise, well, because I'm not a noble or anything, so I'm sure she doesn’t think much of me, that’s why...”

Raising her body, Cattleya asked Saito.

“Hey, are you aware of the condition to be a Noble?”

What’s with that sudden question? That’s completely clear.

“Eh? I’m pretty sure, umm, they have to be able to use magic... they have to be rich...”

“Those are trivial things!”

“But, in this world if you can’t use Magic, you aren’t a noble, right?”

“Wrong.”

Cattleya shook her head.

“There is only one condition that needs to be fulfilled to become a noble. To swear that you will protect the princess even at the cost of your own life, that’s all. Our ancestors were given territory and money by the king because they protected the princess’, his daughter’s, life at the cost of their own. It wasn’t because they could use magic.”

Cattleya stared at Saito with sincere eyes.

“That girl is somewhere in the courtyard, so go look for her. In the courtyard there’s a pond... in that pond there’s a small boat floating. She’s inside it. Ever since she was young whenever there were bad times she’d go there and hide. After you take Louise from there, leave the castle grounds. On the main road there is a carriage waiting for you. The maid that you brought along with you is leading it, so go there.”

“Eh?”

“I don’t admire war. I hate it. Honestly, I don’t want to let Louise go. But, if that girl has decided that she wants to do that and there’s someone that she finds it necessary to go for... If that’s the case, I think we have to let her go. That’s not something for us to decide.”

Cattleya held Saito’s face in her hands.

“May the Founder’s Divine Protection be with you and Louise.”

And then, as if she was dealing with a noble, she kissed Saito’s forehead.

“I leave my cute little sister in your care, Knight-dono.”

Louise was crying inside the boat in the courtyard.

She could hear the sounds of the footsteps and voices of the servants that were looking for her inside the castle. But, just like when she was a child, this boat in the courtyard was a safe place. With its figure hidden by the small island's shadow, it became a blind spot when looked at from inside the castle and didn't stand out at all.

Just like in the time when she was still a kid, she had curled herself up and had covered herself with the blanket that she brought with her. When she was a child and did that... her feelings would usually slowly calm down, but this time it didn't go so well. It appeared that her mood had sunken so low, that she just couldn't brighten up no matter what.

The small steps of someone stepping on the soil inside the courtyard resounded.

She held her breath and stood still as the sounds transformed to the powerful sounds of feet crossing over the wooden bridge that reached up to the small island.

Thinking, "This is bad," she buried her body even deeper into the blanket that was covering her.

As soon as she did that... Splash! The sound of the master of the footsteps jumping into the pond could be heard and she tugged on the blanket.

Unintentionally she uncovered a part of her body and then heard her name being called.

"Louise."

"... Saito?"

"Let's go. Your big sister has prepared a carriage."

"... I won't go."

"Why?"

"Because my family hasn't allowed me to."

“It’s impossible. Your family is on the other side after all. You all sure are stubborn.”

Saito stretched out his hands. However, Louise immediately shook them off.

“What is it already?”

“I don’t want to anymore. It’s fine.”

“Why?”

“Because no matter what I say, no matter how hard I work, I just can’t talk with my family. Who would recognize me? After I thought that I ended up feeling really very lonely.”

Are you concerned with stuff like that? Think about earlier. This girl... as soon as I’m not around for a little, she starts thinking normally.

Getting in the boat, Saito grasped Louise’s hand.

“Geez. I will accept you. I will, your whole existence, completely positively. So, stand up. C’mon.”

After hearing that, Louise blushed and felt her heart becoming warm and fuzzy.

But, she thought to herself that she couldn’t have confidence in Saito’s words alone.

After all, Saito is fine.

After all, her breasts’ size was the same as a kid’s.

That black-haired girl that listens to anything he says is better, isn’t she?

She felt lonely, because she couldn’t get either her parents or sisters to understand her. Yesterday’s words from Siesta left a trail as well. “Saito doesn’t like Louise at all.” Those words had seriously harmed Louise’s self-confidence and will to do anything. Louise hadn’t recognized those words as her own thoughts, but she kept remembering them.

Therefore, Louise grumbled.

“What 'I’ll accept you?' Don’t lie”

“It’s not a lie.”

“It’s a lie. Even in this time’s war you want to fight for the Princess’ honor. The same as Guiche.”

“W-What does the Princess have...”

Remembering, Louise said with cold voice.

“You kissed her, didn’t you?”

“Are you an idiot? That was just the way things turned out...”

“Are you saying you kissed her by mistake? Heee... is that so?”

Saito was slowly getting angry. In anger, he caught Louise’s shoulder and forced her to face him.

“W-What is it?!”

“Are you an idiot?!”

“Who’s an idiot?!”

“Don’t just decide who I like, just because you’re in a bad mood, you selfish girl! You think that just because you’re my master and I’m your familiar, you have the right to tell me who I like?!”

Saito was staring at Louise with burning eyes, shouting at her. *Everything I said came from the bottom of my heart. Why can't this girl understand that?* he thought to himself cursing his own impulses.

“H-H-How dare you say that?!”

“Yeah, I’ll say it as many times as needed. Honestly, I don’t want to have any connection with your guys’ duties and wars, I’d rather go search for a way to return home! I want to go back to Eastern Japan! I do!”

“Then just go ahead!”

Louise shouted. *What is this,* she thought. *Isn't it fine not to yell so much? Be gentler. I'm feeling down right now.*

Saito was always like that. When Louise wanted to do something, he wouldn't listen to her at all even though he was her familiar he didn't understand a thing. He would always turn against her.

That Saito, at whom Louise had yelled, was breathing heavily with his shoulders going up and down. Probably he was choosing which words to answer her back with. *Idiot. Idiot, idiot. After you say something, move away your face,* Louise thought. *I wonder what lines he's going to spew back at me? Exactly how is he going to answer back to me, who told him "Then just go ahead"? "Yeah, I understand! I'll go back," probably?*

However, Saito's reply completely blew off Louise's expectations.

For some reason Saito's... face reddened,

"I love you!"

The air solidified. For a moment, Louise didn't realize what she had just been told.

Just now, what did he say? love? Like as in, that Love? What's this about?

"... Eh?"

"I said I love you! Whenever I look at you my heart starts beating fast! Isn't that what people call love?! That's why I love you! And that's why if you want to protect the Princess' honor I'll come do it with you and you should just go ahead and go instead of complaining here!"

"Eh? Eeh?"

"Anyway, right now you aren't cute at all! What's with this?! What do you think I'm risking my life and fighting for?! It's because I love you! If I didn't I'd just stay in my room and sleep!"

Saito said what he had to say and tried to stand up, but then he noticed.

Louise was restraining him and waiting while blushing.

Suddenly, Saito felt a bit of regret. *Aah, what did I end up saying just now?! Wait a minute, I just confessed! Why?! If I consider the circumstances... now isn't the time to be confessing... I don't get this.*

Saito fell prostrate into the boat.

After some time passed... Louise returned to herself.

She was confused, because she didn't understand what had happened. Anyway, it seemed like she had been confessed to. She had clearly been told by Saito "I love you".

"What should I do?" she thought.

At the same moment she thought that, she realized that she'd probably have to tell everyone. And wariness took over her mind. Anger and delight, two opposite feelings, gushed forth. Not completely understanding the situation, Louise's face started reddening and she lifted Saito's face up.

"If it's a lie, I'll kill you."

She said only that with a shaky voice. Just how red was her face right now? To what extent were her cheeks dyed in red? Anyway, it was hot.

"It's not a lie!"

"I don't really like you."

"I know that."

"Because, you keep jumping from girl to girl all over the place."

"I won't. I won't from now on."

"It's not a question of whether you will or won't. Anyway, just after one year of

knowing me, you said those words with such confidence. Maybe it’s just false confidence.”

“T-Thank you.”

Because she had said all that with a voice, coming from the depths of her heart, Saito ended up thinking that Louise is awfully cute. His thoughts went so far, that he ended up wanting to hug her and stroke her cheeks.

But he couldn’t say such stuff. Louise was incredibly prideful after all. And that pride enveloped Louise’s heart, creating a very thick armor out of which her true feelings could hardly ever reach out.

Louise caught Saito’s shoulders and lifted her hip. And then she peered into his face with serious eyes.

At that moment, Kirche’s words resounded in her ears.

“You probably didn’t let him do anything, right? If that’s the case, it would be obvious that he’d be taken by other girls.”

She thought *Uu~, won’t it be fine to let him for a bit?* and similar things. But, as she thought that it got hard to get into the mood. Even allowing him for a bit was difficult.

However, the only things she couldn’t stand was watching him think about or touch other girls. Louise helplessly decided to gather a bit of real courage.

“H-Hey, you know. Mmm...”

“Yes?”

“Because when you told your Master that you like her you practically swore loyalty, a r-r-reward is necessary, isn’t it?”

“A reward?”

“That’s right. The princess has always told me that loyalty should always be rewarded.”

“I-I see...”

Saito could no longer tell exactly what Louise was trying to do. But when he heard Louise’s next words his blood rose up to his head.

“O-Only one place, okay?”

“What?”

“O-On your Master’s body, only one place, one that you like, i-it’s fine to touch.”

As she said that, not removing her hands from Saito’s shoulders, Louise closed her eyes.

I’ll die, Saito thought.

If I’m told things like this, I’ll die. But if, before I die, I, t-this Louise, then... If this way too cute Master, I, then... As his mind was becoming more and more chaotic, he hugged Louise and suddenly snatched away her lips.

And Louise,

“Ah...” released a moan.

A kiss, hm. So that’s what you decided, hmm. Certainly, unmistakably, it’s only one place.

But, a kiss? Is that the most important? Somehow, Louise ended up feeling more and more in love with Saito, who chose to kiss at a time like this.

However, it seemed that, because they were kissing, Saito’s excitement increased to the max. Having forgotten the “Only one place” rule, his hand reached under Louise’s skirt.

Louise became confused. *This is bad, he doesn't seem to be taking me seriously enough.*

“I-Idiot..., only one place..., moreover, you, that suddenly..., hey, wait, hey, what are you thinking, hey, idiot, wa-, you, *an*, that sort of, *yan*, idiot...”

“Like.”

Saito muttered incoherently, biting on Louise’s earlobe. Louise’s strength left her body and she was pushed down in the boat. *Muu, such serious love. “Which is more important,”* she wondered, as Saito was pushing her down with endless energy.

“T, that, wait, hey..., no good, breasts, not the breasts. No way, not there, nowhere.”

Because of the hands that were in her skirt and in the gap of her shirt, Louise was slowly overtaken by desperation.

“Like. Like very much. Really like.”

Just like using a treasured sword passed down in a family, Saito kept repeating

“Like” rapidly. As was to be expected from the magical word, it stole Louise’s willpower as if electricity was running through her.

“...D-Do you really like me?”

Unintentionally she asked back.

“Yes.”

“Really, honestly? ... Ah”

As she said that their lips connected.

Wait a bit. Even if you like me it’s bad to do it so suddenly. I'm not prepared yet and I also have my pride.

That’s right, I am Louise Françoise Le Blanc de La Vallière.

I am a Duke’s family’s third daughter.

I am, you know, not as easy as a town woman.

There is absolutely no way I’d marry just yet. I can't do it until I'm married for at least three months; even then, where is this familiar touching his Master. I won’t allow him to get so in o-o-oooooo-over his head. Thinking that, Louise raised her fist over her head. Aiming at his nether region, she hit him with her leg.

As soon as she did that, their lips parted and he whispered near her ear.

“I like you. Louise, I like you a lot.”

And with an “I like you a lot” it was decided. Louise was bringing down her fist, but she suddenly lost her strength and unintentionally hugged Saito’s back.

“Aah, now there’s no way out, what should I do, Mother, I will probably be turned into a star by Louise.” As he muttered that, Saito wondered what kind of face he should make at this moment, in the end. Since Louise never started beating him up, he slowly opened his eyes and a lovely scene was spreading out in front of him.

The castle’s employees had gathered around, surrounding the pond.

With a stiffened face, Eléonore stood there.

With a pale face as if she was about to faint, her Mother stood there.

And in between all that were present, with the angriest face of all, stood her Father.

For a moment Louise got a cold sweat and then pushed Saito away.

With a “Splaaash,” Saito fell into the pond.

“What are you doing?!” Saito began shouting and was noticed by the audience inside the courtyard.

Duke of La Vallière ordered with a voice full of dignity.

"Hm~, seize Louise and confine her in the tower. And also, because she won’t be leaving that place for at least a year, please exchange the chain with something sturdier."

“Certainly!” Jerome, the butler, replied.

“As for that guy. That commoner. Hm~, decapitation. Because his body will be exposed for one month, make a brand new stand please.”

“Certainly!” Jerome, agreeing with the same tone.

The employees simultaneously took out brooms, hoes, sickles, spears or swords and attacked. Saito grabbed the handle of Derflinger that was on his back. The runes on his left hand glowed.

“Myy, partner. It’s been a while. I was just wondering if you were going to die a lonely death.”

“Sorry, we’ll talk later!”

“Seems so.”

Saito, without much bashfulness jumped into the boat, hugged Louise and then put her on his shoulder.

And after that he started running.

“W-Who the heck is that guy?! He’s fast!”

“Just like an elf!”

Saito was running like the wind through the castle’s corridors.

Whenever one of the employees stood in his way, with an “I’m sorry,” he apologized and then with one hit with his leg, forced him or her onto the ground.

“What are you all doiiiing?!”

Saying that, the enraged Duke, who had witnessed his youngest daughter getting pushed down, pulled out his cane, but Saito was already out of the spell’s range of effect. The imagination of the people, who didn’t know of Gandálfr’s moving speed, was completely overwhelmed.

However... the gate’s watchers were contacted and were using the golems to lift the drawbridge. The chain, holding the drawbridge, made noises as it was withdrawn.

As Saito jumped into the front garden, where the gate was located, he became pale. It seemed like he wouldn’t make it. It seemed like Saito, who was using the Gandálfr power, wouldn’t be able to jump over the wide canal.

As he thought “We’ve been driven into a corner!,” the chain, that was holding the drawbridge changed color. Influenced by “Alchemy” the chain turned into soft soil and crumbled to the ground. The bridge, that had lost its support, fell down.

Saito ran over the bridge.

As he was crossing it, a carriage jumped out of nowhere. Surprisingly, the carriage wasn’t being pulled by horses, but by one dragon.

Shivering in fear, Siesta was sitting in the coachman's seat.

"Hurry! Get on fast, please!"

After pushing Louise into the carriage, Saito jumped onto it as well.

"W-Why a dragon?"

"I don't know! But, if there were horses, wouldn't they run away? Um, that is, Miss Cattleya told me so! Kyaa! Kyaa, kyaa! Anyway, dragons are scary! Their faces are scary!" screaming that, Siesta struck the bridle in a daze.

"Let's switch," Saito said, receiving the bristle from Siesta and sitting down on the coachman's seat. Siesta smiled and cuddled with Saito. In the seat behind Louise was about to snap, as she watched that scene, but endured. She remembered Saito's words from earlier. "I love you," he said. How many times did he say it…

Well, I'll allow that much. No matter what, a noble feeling jealousy towards a commoner is strange. She smiled and kept her composure, as if she didn't care. As Louise did that Siesta quickly brought her head toward hers.

"Um, please forgive my rudeness. Miss…"

"Hm?"

"It seems that when I got drunk I told you some impolite things… It's a bad habit. It appears that whenever I, um, whenever I get drunk my behavior is different from usual. Yes."

Siesta excused herself for her violent behavior.

"Well, it's fine. From now on try to keep yourself together," Louise replied with the composure of a woman that has won in love.

"Thank you very much!"

Siesta slowly pulled her head away from Louise. After that she cuddled up with Saito.

Aaah, they're too close. But since we were even closer earlier, it should be fine for now. Only for a bit. It's charity.

"But… Saito-san, you sure are a gentleman."

"Hm? I am?"

"That's right! Because even though I'm so close to you… you're not doing anything."

"T-That's… of course I wouldn't."

Louise smiled. *Well of course, that's because you aren't charming at all. Even though you told me that I'm flat as a board. It's strange. It's the board's victory~. And therefore it's the stupid maid's loss~.*

"Well, that being said, *Iya*, my shirt's button got unfastened."

Louise's eyebrow rose up.

"Eh? Well, that's probably because you were moving around so much. Haahaa."

"Well, that's why I always tell you…"

Siesta said with a small voice as she brought her face near Saito's ear. However, it reached Louise's ears pretty clearly. Anyway, this was Siesta's feint jab.

"W-What?"

"If you want to see, just say so. I won't hide anything. There's no need to restrain yourself at all~"

Aah, Siesta. What a thing to say.

From the back seat, the loud sound of the shaking air could be heard. Or rather it wasn't the air that was shaking, it was Louise.

"I see."

"You see?"

“My familiar unfastened the maid’s button, huh?”

“Your familiar unfastened the button because I seemed to be in pain.”

“Save the explanations.”

“But it’s not an explanation.”

“Miss! There was no other way! Saito-san was worried! He was worried, because he likes me!”

Aah, Siesta, don’t add oil instead of water to a burning fire.

Saito started denying it even though he knew it was pointless.

“I did no such thing.”

“You say that, but you were looking at Chii-neesama as well.”

“Just a bit.”

“After all, you deserve treatment worse than a dog’s.”

A useless politeness. Already, the atmosphere he was in meant he couldn’t make any objections. That said, Saito was very tired because he had used so much of the Gandálfr power. One could say, Saito knew perfectly well that he couldn’t make any objections no matter what.

With his ears caught, Saito was pulled into the carriage.

“Miss! Calm down! Miss Vallière!”

“It’s fine. Everything will be over soon. How should I say it~, it’s definitely fate. That’s what I think.”

Saito smiled and vanished inside.

Saito rolled down onto the floor. Louise came upon him.

“First off, everything you and I said in that boat earlier was a mistake.”

“Yes. I understand.”

“From today on, I think a brake is necessary. And you?”

“Being told only that, I’m thankful.”

However, the brake never came.

Saito’s screams could be heard for a long time in the La Vallière’s territory.

As she was watching the coach that was disappearing in the distance, Cattleya smiled. After that, she suddenly started coughing violently. She had exhausted her physical strength with the “Alchemy” incantation she had used earlier.

In her field of vision she could see the drawbridge in the distance. Because she had used the incantation from such a great distance, quite a bit of her Willpower was used up.

Inside the room a thrush was singing.

It was the small wounded bird that she had picked up and bandaged a while back. She gazed at the thrush inside the cage for a while, and then Cattleya gave a kind smile.

She opened the cage’s lid and put her hand inside. The thrush jumped onto her hand. After she took it out from inside, she unfastened the bandages.

She stretched her hand out through the window. The thrush that was on it peered into Cattleya’s face and inclined its head to the side in doubt. As if she was questioning her.

“It’s fine. Now it’s fine.”

The thrush stared at the sky. And then it flapped its wings.

Cattleya looked at the thrush that was flying about in the sky.

Quietly, for a long time, Cattleya gazed at it.

Chapter Four: Commanding Officer Guiche and Officer Cadet Malicorne

Each student who applied for the royal army through the recruiting official who came to the magic academy received training for around two months and then was assigned into various forces.

Tristain's army was split into three branches.

First, there was the "Royal Army" that was directly under the command of the current monarch. The noble generals and officers belonging to the monarchy commanded the mercenaries that were assembled through money. The student officers like Guiche were primarily assigned to this Royal Army or the later mentioned Sky Navy.

Next was the "National Army," where the greater nobles in various places would recruit the people in their territory. This organization was also called the "Marquis Army." The nobles that received land from the king would follow their pledge and organize an army. This was what the Cardinal requested Louise's father, Duke of La Vallière, to organize.

Because the soldiers were originally farmers, the national army was considerably inferior to the mercenary-composed Royal Army. It wasn't suitable for campaigns, but the royal army by itself was lacking in number, so they ended up being brought along. There were many nobles, like Louise's father, Duke of La Vallière, who opposed the war and refused to contribute soldiers too.

Also, because this war was a campaign, half of the national army consisted of wagons… meaning that it ended up being used as a supply unit.

The last was the "Sky Navy."

It was the branch that operated the ships that floated in the sky or the sea.

With the captain at the peak, this branch was most certainly a miniature version of the feudal system. Below the captain, who had absolute authority in the warships, were noble officers that directed the sailors. Though they were called sailors, everyone was some kind of specialist necessary to operate the ship. Unlike the army, which was a branch that was fine as long as the number of people were gathered, experience and habitual training were stressed above all else.

Guiche, being assigned as a reserve officer to the Royal Army, arrived at the Champs de Mars Training Facility in the capital city Tristania on the day after Louise and the others returned home.

Rosha Regiment, Lashene Regiment, Navarre Regiment… The regiment colors that waved in the gardens of the regimental commanders' mansions were, today, assembling at the Champs de Mars Training Facility.

With a letter of introduction written by a drill officer in one hand, Guiche walked around the training facility, where the twelve regiments of the Royal Army, twenty thousand soldiers, had amassed. The group he had ended up being attached to was the De Vineuil Independent Battalion of the Royal Army. He had never heard of it before, but Guiche was excited about his first battle.

Just recently, he had met with his father, the Marshal of the Royal Army.

Because a Marshal is a job for the ones at the end of their life, his father, having retired from military services, was the Marshal. His senile father was very frustrated that he couldn't participate in this war and encouraged Guiche.

"Don't value life, but value name," his natural-born soldier of a father had said, sending Guiche out. All three of his brothers were departing too. His first brother is in charge of de Gramont family's army. The second brother was the captain of the air forces. His third brother was an officer of the royal army.

And he himself… was participating as an officer of the De Vineuil Independent Battalion. However, he couldn't find that essential battalion. He couldn't find the battalion flag drawn on the letter of invitation anywhere.

Reluctantly, he questioned a scary-looking bearded officer.

“Um, where is the De Vineuil Independent Battalion?”

That officer began to preach to Guiche about how he didn’t know the way home.

When Guiche said "This is my attachment from today," he looked at Guiche's head to the tip of his foot, and asked "A student officer?"

"Y-Yes! That's correct!" When he saluted with the military language he remembered, his head was hit.

"Listen, student. On the battlefield, even if you say that you don't know where your battalion is, no one will tell you."

Then the officer said, "There," and pointed to a corner of the training facility.

It was right beside the lodging house, and little sunshine hit that area.

The soldiers were leaning on the wall of the lodging house, staring at the sky dully. Guiche was shocked to see that there were people drinking sake too.

Looking carefully, he realized that most people there were old men and unmotivated people. The group seemed to be a washout already.

"D-Don't tell me, this is..." Flustered, he asked one soldier.

"H-Hey, soldier."

"What is it?"

An old mercenary carrying a heavy lance stood up.

"Is this the De Vineuil Independent Battalion?"

"Yes."

Guiche stood petrified to the spot, as if he had been hit by something on the head.

It was his glorious first campaign, yet the group he was assigned to were old men or delinquent soldiers that clearly looked unmotivated. In other words, it was just a scum battalion for fitting numbers.

It was "independent" and not attached to any regiment for probably that reason. In other words, no regimental commander wanted to take charge of them.

When he asked, "But, where is the battalion commander?", the old mercenary pointed to one section of the corner. A weak, white-haired old man was standing there, supporting himself with his staff. Beside him stood a young and fat noble wearing a staff officer badge on his shoulder. It seems that that was the "battalion headquarters".

That's the battalion commander... It was an old man who seemed like his heart would stop just from the voices during the time of assault, without having the need to get hit by a projectile. *I really got the short end of the stick here.* Guiche thought, getting depressed. Anyways, Guiche approached them to give his greetings.

"Reserve Officer Guiche de Gramont, here to take up my new post!"

"Haa? What?! What's going on?!"

Battalion Commander De Vineuil, asked back while shaking. It seemed he had bad hearing.

"I am Guiche de Gramont! I have been assigned to this battalion as a reserve officer. I want to receive approval," Guiche shouted near his ears.

"Oh, I see! It's time to eat! Can't fight on an empty stomach! You need to eat properly too!"

Giving up, Guiche nodded. There, the battalion staff officer whispered something to the battalion head.

"Wh-What! Assignment! Then you should have said so!"

I have been saying that Guiche thought discouragingly.

"Li-Li-Line-up!"

The weak battalion head raised his voice. Dully, the soldiers assembled in sluggish movements.

"In-In-Introducing the new company commander!"

Heh? Company commander?

While Guiche stood dumbfounded, the battalion commander continued.

"Assigned to our glorious De Vineuil Independent Musket Infantry Battalion... Name!"

"I am Guiche de Gramont!"

"I am leaving the second company to this Grandel-kun! Therefore, the second company will now be designated as 'Grandel Company'! Salute to the company commander!"

Sluggishly, the soldiers belonging to the company saluted. *Hey, the name is wrong. More importantly, company commander? That's impossible!*

"Wai-Wait, battalion head! I'm a student officer! To be the company commander all of a sudden!"

Becoming the company commander meant he would be in command of over a hundred soldiers. There was no way he could do that.

However, the battalion head, while shaking, placed his hand on Guiche's shoulder.

"The company commander deserted this morning. We were looking for a new one."

The company commander deserted? What kind of battalion is this?

"There are more senior officers, right?!"

"Ah, besides me, the staff officer, and the other company commanders, there are no nobles in this battalion."

"That's why the only other possible officer is you. Welcome, company commander."

He had heard the Royal Army was lacking officers, but for it to be so severe.

Guiche face visibly paled.

The De Vineuil Independent Musket Infantry Battalion was a gun corps with about three-hundred and fifty people. It was split into three companies. Two were gun companies and one short spear company was a guard. One of the gun companies was entrusted to Guiche soon after he took up his new post. Even though it was a gun corps, the equipment consisted of only antique arquebuses. The newer models, muskets, were nowhere to be found.

More importantly, gun corps... Guiche grabbed his head. He had never learned how to use guns in his training. He couldn't really make any complaints over the two months of sudden training...

Either way, it would have been nice if they had told the branch of the group he was being assigned to in advance.

He had heard that the disorder in the Royal Army, which employed large amounts of mercenaries despite the lack of officers, was severe... but for it to be this bad...

While Guiche was worrying like that, a smart-looking middle-aged man came up to him, carrying an arquebus that had the gun barrel shortened and a dagger on his hips. Wearing a steel helmet, he wore thick fur and an iron breastplate.

"Greetings, company commander."

"Y-You too. You are?"

"Nicola, a sergeant for this company. I act as an aide and such."

"Act" was probably modesty. There was a cut on his forehead and suntanned face. He looked like a sergeant who had been doing military services for a long time. It was certain that he, a non-commissioned officer, was the one managing the company.

"Iyaa, what a disaster."

A mercenary sergeant, who might have even been older than Guiche's father, muttered to him.

"Forced to be the company commander so soon after you arrived. From appearance, you seem to be a student."

"Y-Yes."

Guiche nodded.

"Well, me and my comrades will look after the company. The Commanding Officer should settle down a bit." Being told by the experienced mercenary sergeant like that, Guiche felt a bit at ease.

A trumpet sounded far away. To align the soldiers, the company commanders started raising their voices. The instructions of Albion expeditionary force's commander-in-chief General Olivier de Poitier were about to begin. After receiving the general's report, the soldiers gathered in this training facility would depart for La Rochelle. There they would ride on boats and aim for the sky continent of Albion.

Now then, at the same time.

This is the harbor of La Rochelle, where the main fleet of the air forces were stationed.

On the fleet hanging on the harbor created using an enormous tree... the dry wood of the ancient Yggdrasil, the last riggings and boarding of officers and sailors were being conducted.

Standing at the root of Yggdrasil, Malicorne, who was scheduled to board a warship as a military cadet, was looking up in awe.

The sight of several tens of sailing warships, the main air force of the kingdom, hanging on the branches of the enormous Yggdrasil and waiting to depart was certainly an unexpected spectacle.

"Uwaah..." He stood gaping. While looking up at the sky, Malicorne was sent flying.

"Wh-What!" Yelling that, a tanned man was staring at him. Examining, the man wasn't wearing a mantle and just a commoner. Realizing he was sent flying by a

commoner, Malicorne was enraged.

"H-How insolent! How dare you send a noble flying!"

Doing so, the sailor stared at Malicorne. Figuring out that Malicorne was just a military cadet, the man smiled profoundly.

"Hey, Bo-chan. This place is different from that corrupt world. I'll teach you the order in the air forces, so dig the holes in your ear and listen well."

"Eh? Eeh?"

It seemed that in the air forces, you couldn't just swagger around because you're a noble. He couldn't imagine a commoner that was greater than a noble.

"First is that captain! He is the greatest on the ship! Next is the executive officer! The earlier officers are appointed here. Voyage head, sail head, artillery head, deck head, kitchen head... In the air forces, even commoners can become officers if they achieve enough!"

That's how it is Malicorne's eyes widened. An army system that had the possibility of commoners becoming superior officers... That was the air forces.

"And next are the non-commissioned officers! And below that is finally military cadets like you guys! On a boat, you guys are just useless maggots! Remember this!"

Malicorne stood up and saluted.

"Un, understood!"

"I'll give you guts! Clench your teeth!"

Still standing attention, Malicorne received a sharp slap to his face.

"Okay, go! Run! Fool! If a military cadet walks on a warship, they'll be shouted at!

Malicorne ran off perplexed.

The warship he finally found, *Redoutable*, was a splendid warship with forty-eight gates on the gunwale and seventy mails in length. It was a new warship that was perfected just one month before.

Climbing up the trap and trying to board the warship that was hanging on a branch, an officer at the entrance stopped him.

"Hey! You! Where do you think you're going?!"

Panicking, Malicorne saluted.

"Military cadet, Malicorne de Grandple! Taking up a new post today!"

"I'm Lieutenant Moranju, person in charge of shifts."

It was a noble officer wearing a mantle. He was checking the boarding soldiers at the entrance of the ship. Malicorne was relieved that the man was a noble. *Guess that after all, there aren't many commoner officers.*

After looking over Malicorne's fattened body from top to bottom, he asked.

"Is that your only luggage?"

Malicorne lifted up the bag hanging in his hand.

When Malicorne answered "Yes," the Lieutenant scowled. After thinking a bit, Malicorne realized he had made a mistake. An answer like "Yes" does not exist in the army, especially the air forces.

"Yes sir, Lieutenant!" And he saluted. Right away, Malicorne was made to fix his language and the way he saluted.

"There is no need to be so stiff in the air forces. Boy!"

A boy approached them and saluted.

"He takes care of you cadets. If there is something you don't understand, ask. Lead him to the apprentice officer room."

The last part was targeted at the boy.

"I will carry your bag, cadet. Ah, my name is Julian."

Malicorne handed him his bag. The boy was younger than him. A black haired boy still around fourteen or fifteen.

"Cadet, where did you come from?"

"The Academy of Magic." When he answered that, the boy's face lit up.

"What's wrong?"

"My older sister is working there. Her name is Siesta... Do you know her?"

Malicorne shook his head. The number of servants working at the academy was large. He pretty much remembered the faces, but he hadn't remembered every single name.

"That's expected. There's no way a noble would remember every single servants' name."

After leading Malicorne to the apprentice officer room, Julian left running. It seemed that the boy had a mountain-load of jobs to do.

In the apprentice officer room there were three other military cadets like Malicorne. Moreover, one of them was a student from the Academy of Magic. He was an upperclassman, so Malicorne bowed his head. He was an attractive guy with wild features. He had thick eyebrows, and a smile was on his cordial face.

"I'm Stix. You are?"

"Malicorne." Saying so, he was asked if he was in the same class as Kirche. Thinking back to the boy just a while ago, he grumbled that there were quite a number of local subjects on this ship while nodding.

"In the past, a bit, you know, I got along well with her." Stix said embarrassedly. Looking closer, there were traces of burns on his forehead. *In what way did they know each other?* He thought, but Stix was an upperclassman, so he couldn't ask. If it was an embarrassing wound, he would be angered.

Stix was firmly sitting in his chair.

"Now then, everyone."

When Malicorne entered, it seemed there was a serious meeting going on in the apprentice officer room. The other three were bending over and bringing their faces near Stix. It seems they were whispering. The newcomer Malicorne was offered a chair and sat down.

Stix stared seriously into Malicorne's face.

"We have to explain everything to a newcomer, it seems. Malicorne-kun, this ship is carrying fearsome explosives."

"Explosives?"

Malicorne swallowed his breath and looked at the senior cadet.

"That's right."

"Is it a new type of gunpowder? Or is it a new weapon?"

Shaking, he asked. A powerful new gunpowder? Or perhaps a difficult new weapon? Either way, it doesn't seem like something that could just be ignored.

"It's not something like that."

Stix whispered.

"Then... what is it?"

"Human."

"Human?"

Stix frowned and muttered.

"Yes. There is an enemy on board this ship."

"Which means there is a traitor here?"

Malicorne raised his voice without thinking.

"Shhh! That person hasn't betrayed us yet..., but the possibility isn't low. That's what I think. There are quite a number of senior officers that think this way too."

"Just what kind of person is this?"

Stix nodded.

"Now then, shall we show our new companion the rat?"

"Agreed."

"Yeah."

And so, Malicorne ended up going to inspect this "fearsome explosive".

Proceeding to the afterdeck, the captain was there. He was discussing something with a tall noble officer. Seeing the captain, Malicorne became nervous. Mustached, he was a middle-aged man with a strong presence. Being the captain of the warship, he must be quite an elite. Just like his outer appearance, he was also quite "skilled" on the inside. And, the "fearsome explosive" the military cadets were talking about seemed to be able to talk down to this captain.

"That would probably cause the ship to sink. To sail in the clouds is to always gamble with danger." The fearless-looking man, who was at the prime of his life, said in a strong Albion accent to the captain beside him. The captain hanged his head in shame.

Hearing that voice, Malicorne jumped as if tongs were thrust at his spinal column.

Albion accent? Isn't that an enemy?!

Secretly, Stix whispered into Malicorne's ear.

"Look. His name is Henry Bowood. Without a doubt, a man of Albion."

"What did you say? Why is someone from an enemy country on board?"

"Let me teach you what he did at the battle of Tarbes. He is, that large warship...

Do you know about it? The 'Lexington'."

"The giant warship that was sunk by the miraculous light of our army, right?

The sinking of the Albion fleet had become known as the "miraculous light". Of course, there were not many people who knew about its true source.

"He was the captain of that 'Lexington'."

"Wha-!"

Malicorne almost bit his tongue.

"Our army has employed several Albion air force officers that were captured as prisoners of war to help pilot us around Albion's airspace. It is limited to people who hold dissatisfaction towards Albion's current political administration, but... how can they trust such people?"

"Exactly. How could they board on a ship with former enemies."

"However, it seems the air forces have decided to use them. In other words..., we can't do anything about it."

Stix spoke angrily. Hearing that, one military cadet said, "It's like they are saying we won't be of use," in self derision.

At that moment, the captain saw the military cadets and waved his hand for them to come.

"Boys, come and say your greetings. This is Mister Bowood. He is here as an instruction officer. Mister, these are the youngsters of my fleet."

Bowood smiled and held out his hand. Malicorne felt anger welling inside him.

He's an enemy.

It's too much to seek help from an enemy just because you don't have confidence in your own seamanship. And now we, military cadets, have to lower our heads to him?

The captain's expression changed.

"You boys... Mister Bowood worked for an enemy country, but he is employed in our army now. Not only that, but he is also from a noble pedigree. I won't let you go without your greeting."

Being ordered by the captain that way, the military cadets reluctantly saluted.

Bowood spread his hands and disappeared to the main deck.

"Instruction officer!" The captain rushed to chase after him. No matter how skilled he is, if the captain is like that, he'll be a bad example for the crew.

Stix whispered to Malicorne and the others in a small voice.

"I have a plan to make that man powerless."

"What kind of plan?"

"Well, the warship will be in chaos during battle."

"Probably so," Malicorne agreed.

"And, it isn't certain that bullets will fly from the front."

The whole group felt tense at Stix's words. He was suggesting that they shoot and kill him in combat.

Chapter Five: Flame of Twenty Years Ago

D’Angleterre (Angle Province)

Located in the southwest area facing the sea, these settlements were said to be built a few centuries ago by immigrants from Albion. This area had always been troublesome for the kings of Tristain over the generations.

This was because there was a culture of independence here; whenever something happened, they would oppose the central government.

So around a hundred years ago, when a religious leader from the religious country Romalia started an event to practice their religion, the highly motivated people in this region all rushed to join in this event. Even though this displeased the king and raised his suspicions… Still the people in this region continued to maintain the unique carefree style, and willingly accepted the terms suggested, so there wasn’t any vigorous suppression.

In other words, the people in D’Angleterre were slick and pleased both sides.

Twenty years ago, they forced the Tristain government to recognize their own independent government, and set up a temple for a new religion.

Because of that, they became an eyesore to the Romalian government. In the end, Tristain was pressured to send an army to suppress them… That was what was recorded regarding the incident then.

That day, twenty years ago, Agnes was still only three years old. Her memories about then are fragmented, yet still very fresh and strong.

The three-year-old Agnes was originally collecting seashells on the seashore.

Then she found something more beautiful than the pretty seashells sculptured by the waves. It was… A ring with a big ruby on it, beautiful like a fire-- It was sparkling on the finger of a young female that had been washed ashore.

The three-year-old Agnes felt afraid, as she stretched out her hand to touch that ruby ring. At that instant, the female opened her eyes and she asked Agnes in a trembling voice.

"…This place is?"

"D, D'Angleterre."

After Agnes replied, the young female appeared satisfied, and nodded.

After that, Agnes ran to inform the adults that she had found someone who had been washed ashore. Even though that female was on the brink of death, under the care of the villagers she managed to pull through.

She called herself Vittoria. Even though she was a noble, as she was a member of the new religion, she was pursued by Romalia but she escaped.

A Tristain squad came to this place a month later.

They burned the village indiscriminately.

Fathers, mothers… The home she was born and grew up in… All swallowed by flames in an instant.

The young Agnes kept running amidst the flames, and finally escaped into the house Vittoria was hiding in.

Vittoria hid Agnes under a blanket. Not long after, a group of men rushed into the room.

"The Romalian woman is here!"

The rough male shout made Agnes very scared.

Following that, she heard a voice chanting a spell.

The next moment, Vittoria, who let Agnes hide on the bed, was surrounded by

flames. As Agnes' consciousness gradually faded away, she saw someone who, despite being burnt by scorching flames, was casting water magic on Agnes to increase her resistance to fire-- It was Vittoria.

Agnes's memories ended there temporarily. The next scene that was reflected in her eyes was--

A man's neck.

An ugly neck that had very obvious burn marks.

Agnes was being carried piggyback by that man. Seeing the wand in his hand, Agnes understood that he was a mage. In other words, she understood that this was the man that used Fire magic to burn her village into ashes.

Agnes's consciousness began fading once more… When she woke up, she realized she was lying by the shore, wrapped in a blanket. The village kept on burning in the massive flames. Agnes stared at the wavering flames without shifting her eyes.

She was the only survivor.

* * *

From that day, over twenty years had passed.

Yet whenever she closed her eyes, she would imagine those massive flames.

Those massive flames that had burned her family and savior.

At the other end of those flames, a man's back would appear.

After growing up, Agnes learned that incident was part of Romalia's "New Religion Hunt". The trigger for that incident was protection of Vittoria in the village who escaped from Romalia. Furthermore, she investigated and found out that it was conducted with the excuse of "eradicating a contagious disease".

Since there was a change in religion in Romalia, the New Religion Hunt came to a halt as well. However, the wound in Agnes's heart had not healed.

Even though she had put an end to Richmon--the man who accepted bribes from Romalia and made the plans for that incident-- with her own hands, her revenge was still incomplete. The flames of vengeance in Agnes's heart would not extinguish until all the people who had burned D'Angleterre to ashes were eradicated.

* * *

The information bank for the Royal Army was situated at one corner of the eastern part of the Tristain Palace.

Even among the Royal Army, only personnel at high positions were allowed to enter this place. In fact, Agnes could be said to have worked hard to prove herself in order to earn the right to enter places like this.

The Musketeer Corps that Agnes led was one of the few defending squads that would not participate in this battle of conquest against Albion, even though they were imperial guards. In a war like this where the entire country's strength is immersed, by right they should have been participating in the battle as well… But the most crucial reason was that the highest commanding officer for the upcoming battle, de Poitiers, had no pleasant feelings towards them.

Even though the scale of the battle would be small, the position of leader of the imperial guards was equivalent to a general commanding a distant conquest, or even higher. So if the imposing and qualified Musketeer Corps participated in this battle, it was quite likely that de Poitiers' achievements would be taken away by them. So the General, who hoped to become marshal, naturally refused to let them participate in the battle. That is to say, all the contributions and achievements would be gathered by him, and he would not tolerate someone above him during military conference meetings.

Besides, Agnes was not even a mage. What can a mere commoner do? De Poitiers had always looked down upon Agnes and her squad.

Of course, the reasoning on the surface was an entirely different story. He put forth a reasonable justification that, “Regarding the Musketeer Corps of the imperial guards, they should naturally do their utmost to protect Her Highness.”

But to Agnes, this was instead a good chance.

Frankly speaking, she did not care about what happened to Albion.

With such a mindset, Agnes immersed herself in the information bank of the Royal Army, and after about two weeks, she finally found the document she was searching for. The following words were written on the cover of that document:

“Magical Research Experimental Group”

It was a small group of only around thirty people; it was the squad that destroyed Agnes’ village.

She flipped through several pages; all the members were nobles.

That guy too? There were names recorded in there that shocked her.

Agnes bit her lips hard, and carefully read through each page. To her dismay, quite a number of these members were already dead.

Reading though it, Agnes was so surprised that she widened her eyes… Immediately following that, her expression became distorted by hatred and displeasure.

This was because the page regarding the leader of the squad was ripped off. It was clear who did this… Yet there was no way to find out who was their leader now.

She was unable to find out about the most sinful man.

Agnes’s body began to tremble.

In the town of Rosais, which would require two days horse ride from the capital

of Albion, Londinium, a group of dangerous looking men appeared.

It included a man with a big patch of burn scars on the side of his face… A squad led by Menvil. It was just a small squad with about ten people, but the pressuring aura they gave off was comparable to a large squad of heavily armed spearmen.

The leather coats they wore were filled with stains, showing what experienced mercenaries they were. Under the coat, each of them were probably holding onto their weapons. As to what their weapons were, it was really hard to guess.

The group came to a smelting stove at an air force factory near the countryside. It was a smelting stove charged with melting metal to make cannon balls, but now the technicians were all trying hard to come up with strategies. This was because the temperature of the stove could not be increased any further; lead was still okay, but its current low temperature couldn't melt other metals.

“Boss…”

“There's not enough coal, and the wind is weak. What a headache… We must get a hundred cannon balls ready by the afternoon…”

The nagging chats of the technicians could be heard.

Right at that moment, opposite the direction Menvil’s squad was traveling in, a bunch of trolls appeared. Trolls were humanoids that resided in the northern highlands of Albion, and they could be as tall as five men.

Even though their numbers weren’t great, they possessed a strong desire for battle. War between humans was not their concern. However, they would be able to use clubs to beat their most hated humans into human paste as much as they want, so they participated in this war as well.

Indeed, they made for reliable comrades. Because of their huge size, they were very useful in a siege. Yet they were always acting arrogant and almighty no matter where they went, so human soldiers hated them very much. And they would always defy orders and act on their own, so no matter how strong of a force they were, there were a lot of commanding officers who were unable to handle them.

Speaking of which, for trolls like these to gather and move forward in a group of around twenty, it looked like a large forest sprinting ahead. The technicians and marines hurriedly ran to the sides, letting this group of trolls pass.

The trolls gave off a voice like a tsunami from their thick, rough throats, looking at the humans running and hiding at their feet. They opened their mouths wide, their breathing sounded like a gigantic bellows moving up and down. They were mocking all those small and helpless humans.

This group of trolls stopped in their tracks.

That was because a human stood in their path, the group led by Menvil. *There is a human brave enough to stand in our path?* The trolls found it hard to believe.

The trolls vibrated their throats like bellows and growled for some time.

“What is that bunch of useless things nagging about?”

Menvil asked, looking disgusted. Standing beside him, a man with piercing eyes spoke up to report to their leader.

“They are saying 'move aside'.”

Menvil ordered his subordinate who could understand Troll language,

“Tell them, this land belongs to humans.”

His subordinate said a few lines in Troll language. Once the sentence had left his mouth, the Trolls agitatedly raised their spiked hammers in their hands.

There was a piece of metal even larger than a cannonball at the tip of the spiked hammer, something so strong it could even smash a solid castle wall in one blow.

If hit directly by that thing, a human would stand no chance of survival.

“Hey, what did you say to them?” Menvil asked.

“Err… Buru, Shubu, Toru, Uuru… Oh shit, I made a mistake. This is the worst insult possible, I am sorry.”

“So, that's the reason.” Menvil replied.

One of the furious Trolls aimed at the group and sent his spiked hammer crashing down.

Menvil used his left hand to lift his coat and took out the weapon inside; it was a long, coarse metal rod. He used his right hand to hold the metal rod, waving it lightly.

And then he chanted a spell.

A bunch of flames flew off from the metal rod and wrapped around the Troll's right arm holding the spiked hammer.

In the blink of an eye, that flame melted the Troll’s arm together with the spiked hammer. The metal pieces that were heated red flew off in all directions, but the man beside Menvil carried out a spell-chant, and used Wind magic.

A small tornado engulfed the melted metal, and wrapped it onto the faces of the Trolls. The red metal scorched their skins and they gave off painful moans.

The fire emerging from the tip of the wand became even stronger.

Their surroundings became a sea of flames just like that.

The smell of burnt Trolls spread around.

Under the light from the flames, Menvil revealed a cruel smile. He stared straight at the Trolls that were rolling around in pain.

Several minutes later--

Menvil and gang stepped onto the carbonized Trolls and moved on.

“Oh my, what an unbearable stench.”

One of the group members complained.

“What are you talking about?” Menvil said.

“This sweet scent of a living thing burnt to the very end… Is something normal perfume cannot compare with… The best smell there can be.”

Stunned, the technicians shivered as they watched how the Trolls were burned. The Trolls' bodies were mixed with melted metal pieces. Those were the spiked hammers that the Trolls had in their hands originally.

"Who are those people...? This is steel. To not even need a wind box or stove to melt them…"

On a destroyer not far from there, Wardes and Fouquet were standing on the deck, waiting impatiently for the arrival of the "goods".

"It is fifteen minutes past the agreed time. Gee, for someone who cannot even follow time strictly, can they really initiate an operation as tight as a pinhole? This is an occupation assignment, a very troublesome job."

"Menvil the 'White Flame,' is very well known among mercenaries. It is rumored that he is cruel, sly… and very powerful."

"No matter, it is hard to have a good impression of someone who came late."

As the two chatted about this, they saw Menvil and his men finally reaching them.

A ladder was let down from the destroyer's deck.

Menvil and gang climbed up the ship with a burnt meat smell.

"You people, what did you burn before coming over?"

"Just around twenty Trolls."

Menvil replied as if it were nothing. Hearing him say that, Fouquet's face went pale.

Everyone gathered in the room specially prepared for military conferencing in order to discuss the details of their operation.

The main objective of this operation was to occupy the Academy of Magic.

Cromwell planned to take the students hostage and use them as bartering chips, so as to negotiate with the two countries that were allying to attack.

They would sneak past Tristain’s patrol lines and move straight into the Academy of Magic.

“Even though they're just a bunch of kids, it's still a nest of mages. Will these people be fine?”

Fouquet, who had used a huge golem to attack the Academy in the past, showed her unhappiness with this operation.

“Don’t worry, almost all the teachers are participating in the war; even the male students are gone. There should only be female students left there.” Wardes said.

“Really?”

“As the Viscount mentioned, that is what is meant to be a noble, what a bunch of troublesome fellows.”

Menvil said with a tone of self mockery.

“You were originally a noble as well?”

“Basically all mages are nobles right? Miss Mathilda.”

Hearing him call out her past noble name, Fouquet blushed.

“Oh, am I that famous?”

“Why did you give up your identity as a noble?”

“I have long forgotten the reason.” Fouquet replied unhappily.

Menvil smiled instead, and said,

“I remember very clearly.”

“Is that so…”

Fouquet put on an indifferent smile by the side of her mouth. The number of mages that had abandoned the title of noble and became commoners was not that few. Yet the ends of these people were basically all very similar. They might become criminals like Fouquet… Or become mercenaries like Menvil, anyway it was one or the other. And, most people would walk to the end of their lives regretting their decision.

As for Fouquet --even though she would definitely not admit it-- she had some unrealistic dreams from time to time as well. Like… If she were able to live on as a noble… Even though she knew very clearly that it was impossible. But sometimes she couldn't help but recall… That youthful period where she didn't even know about the word "uneasiness."

As for Menvil, he seemed to be the kind not fated with that kind of regret. It appeared as though he congratulated himself on his choice from the bottom of his heart.

"You seem to like yourself very much."

Hearing Fouquet's words, Menvil laughed.

"To me, my current job is the best I can ever have."

"Why?"

"Because I can burn humans to my heart's content."

"Do you hate humans?"

"How can that be, of course I like them, precisely because I like them, I burn them. Don't you get it? That smell, that smell created by my own flames… Only that smell can get me excited."

Just like a slug wriggling on her spine, Fouquet felt disgusted from the bottom of her heart.

"I realized that when I was twenty. Back then I was still in a certain squad belonging to Tristain."

The team members gathered here couldn't help but look at each other.

Fouquet and Wardes kept quiet.

Menvil began talking about his past events.

It was twenty years ago.

I was a military officer that had just hit twenty years of age, and was set into a squad called the “Magical Research Experimental Group.” The leader of the squad was a man around the same age as me.

That small group was the first to be formed only with nobles… An experimental group formed only with mages. No, that was slightly different from a squad of magical guards, that was a group of combatants similar to idols. Viscount Wardes, since you were a leader there before, you should understand what I mean right? Even though we were riding flashy mystical beasts and causing envious uproar wherever we went… we could not even urinate outside, and it was even harder to perform some dirty tasks. Anyway, I won't investigate why you left that place.

As for us, the “Magical Research Experimental Group” was formed by a group of low-class nobles… Hmm, basically we were similar to a group that does all the odds and ends; we were ordered to take care of some things like catching thieves, investigating how attack magic affects the human body, and research on how much damage is done when using area magic in battle.

And in operations requiring the elimination of rioting gangs or suppression of nobles in rural areas and such, we were the fighting force that always got sent in first.

To those big shots, we should have been a very useful team.

Let me tell you, the leader of that team was very strong.

“Leader?” Fouquet asked.

“That’s right,” Menvil nodded.

He continued his story.

As I mentioned just now, speaking of that leader… Even though he was only slightly over twenty years old, he had a lot of guts.

He could look indifferent as he burned the enemy to death, after all. I was totally impressed by him back then.

But, it was that one particular operation that made me totally mesmerized by that leader.

At the western shores of Tristain, there was a lowdown area called D'Angleterre. It was a poor village with nothing at all. Besides picking up some oysters there, there was nothing of value; it was a lifeless and lonely village.

In the end we received orders, saying that there was a plague going on there, and that the situation had gotten out of control; so we were to burn and destroy the village. And this order came from rather higher up…

So we hurriedly set off to execute this order.

Our leader was the greatest.

After all, he did not go easy at all.

Whether it was a woman or a child, he eradicated them all without a care.

He manipulated a flame that was like a tornado, and in a moment, the village became a sea of flames.

Because it was at night, the ocean reflected the light from the fire, it was really beautiful.

The most notable thing was that village had no plague at all.

"Then why burn an entire village down?"

"Because of the 'New Religion Hunt'."

"New Religion Hunt?"

“It was due to pressure from Romalia. That village hid a woman, a member of the New Religion, who had escaped from that country. And to make things worse, that whole area was covered with New Religion members. So if something like this were to happen again in the future, it would be problematic, and it was on the way, so might as well burn that whole village down and end things once and for all. Speaking of which, the plague was just an excuse.”

Wardes listened to this past event indifferently. Fouquet on the other hand stared at Menvil, not hiding the unhappiness in her heart at all.

“Okay, just like that, when the suppression mission at D’Angleterre was completed… I was already totally mesmerized by that kind of leader. When I realized that I really wanted to be just like him, I aimed at his back and waved my wand.”

“How incomprehensible; Why would someone attack a person he admired?”

“Actually I don't really understand it myself. Anyway, I probably just wanted to verify whether that person was indeed worthy to be someone I admire from the bottom of my heart. If he lost against me, then he was not that kind of person.”

“And, what happened then?”

Menvil gave off a smile with evil intent and pointed to the side of his face that had been burned out of shape.

“This was the result. That guy was really something, he actually took me down like it was nothing. So I escaped immediately. After all, I waved my wand and attacked the leader; of course I couldn't stay in the squad anymore.

“And then?”

“And then things became the way they are now. I originally thought that if I became a mercenary, one day I would be able to meet that leader. But things didn’t go as smoothly as I expected. I'm not sure if he was killed by someone, or if he retired… I haven't heard anything regarding that leader since the day I received this burn scar on my face. What a pity; I am so much stronger than I was back then. I can create a flame that is hotter than back then, hotter than anyone’s magic…”

Menvil laughed loudly. As if a certain nerve in his mind had snapped suddenly. He continued to laugh,

“Ahh, I really hope I can see that guy once more! I want to see him and thank him! I don't regret anything! Be it giving up my title as a noble or becoming a killer… I regret nothing! But I'm unable to thank that leader. This is the only thing that pains me! I want to see him, I really want to see him! This scar screams out like that every night!”

Menvil, as if mad, continued that insane laughter for quite some time.

Chapter Six: Sortie

The end of the year, first week of Wynn's moon, Man's day of the week became a day that was imprinted in the history of Halkeginia.

It was the next day of Void, when the two moons that hung in the sky overlapped. During this day, when the Albion continent was at its closest point to Halkeginia, a large fleet of Tristain and Germania ships carrying a united army of 60,000 soldiers sailed off from La Rochelle for the Albion invasion.

Tristain and Germania together had 500 ships. Only sixty of them were battleships while the rest carried soldiers and supplies.

Queen Henrietta and Cardinal Mazarini were in La Rochelle port, standing on top of the World Tree pier, watching the fleet sail off.

All the ships going up into the sky at the same time surely was an amazing sight to behold.

“It's as if they are seeds carried away by the wind,” Cardinal Mazarini said, sharing his thoughts.

“Seeds that will repaint the continent.”

“There’s no seed that can repaint a white country, blue.”

The flag of Tristain’s royal family was a white lily on a blue background.

“It’s possible that we will be defeated,” Mazarini muttered.

“I do not intend to be defeated.”

“General De Poitiers is a great commander who is both bold and careful. He is likely to succeed.” Henrietta knew that calling him a great commander was a bit

of a stretch, but there were no other generals with more talent than him. Generals who surpassed him existed only in history books.

“I wonder why we have to fight though?”

Mazarini muttered, in a barely audible voice.

“Why would you ask such a thing?”

“We could have blockaded Albion to make them starve. With careful planning, it could be a very successful idea.”

“We will march.”

Henrietta muttered without changing her expression.

“Don’t say that. Courage is not necessary to settle it once and for all. Well, maybe I'm just getting old.”

Mazarini patted his whitening beard.

“If we were going to lose, would you use the "Void" in this war, Your Majesty?”

It was a highly secret matter to discuss. Only a few people knew that Louise was a Void user. Henrietta, the Cardinal… and a few royal generals.

“I should be burned... with pleasure I would burn as a retribution for my sins.”

Henrietta muttered silently, staring into the emptiness.

“Calm down. Your Majesty won't go there alone. Hopefully my old bones are good enough for that.”

Henrietta entrusted generals with knowledge of the Void only as the trump card.

After hearing about Louise’s Void, at first, General De Poitiers did not even try to believe in it. But it was not impossible either. Because Void was considered a legend, he could not believe in its existence.

However, after being reminded about the military results in Tarbes, with much effort, the general believed in it.

Obtaining the legendary element of Void redoubled his courage and he promised Henrietta a swift victory.

Henrietta, to ensure the victory in the first battle, gave him permission to control the Void.

Henrietta sighed over her own sinfulness.

This war… against country, people.

It was nothing more than letting one's personal grievance out on them.

The war was only a means to calm down lover's enmity.

How many humans did I send away to death for this?

It even included her childhood and best friend, too.

In such war, there is no victory or defeat, it cannot make one's crimes disappear, Henrietta thought.

Despite knowing this, I still declare the patriotism for the sailing off troops, I will burn in hell for this.

A trickle of blood ran down the edge of her lips as Henrietta bit them, screaming out,

"Viva Tristain!"

The sounds of the queen's cheers sounded in the sky.

Officers lined up on the upper deck, saluted Henrietta, who was seeing them off, and shouted following the queen,

"Viva Tristain! Viva Henrietta!"

These shouts, accompanied with a chorus of the rest of 60,000 men that joined in, roared in the sky.

"Viva Tristain! Viva Henrietta!"

The chest-piercing repetitive cheers only intensified Henrietta’s awareness of her crime…

At the same time, in the Academy of Magic…

To use Fire by himself peacefully, Colbert finally reached the "power" at last. The power of heat… That is to say, the power to convert heat into movement somehow.

Though steam based mechanisms made up for it in some measure, it wasn’t enough for Colbert, who wanted to upgrade it into the Zero Fighter’s engine "power".

Colbert concentrated on the analysis of this "Enjin".

Though he wanted to assemble something close to it by trial and error… It was impossible to learn how to assemble an internal combustion Enjin of equal accuracy.

First of all, metallurgy technologies were primitive in Halkeginia.

The iron that composed the Enjin could not be manufactured. Even with the square-class spell "Alchemy" it would be difficult to create such advanced manufactured iron. A person’s magic technique mixes with impurities anyway.

Secondly, the processing technology.

To assemble a high quality Enjin, you would need to make a lot of identical parts. Considering the technology of Halkeginia, it was nearly impossible.

In Halkeginia, the concept of an entirely identical thing didn't exist.

For instance, even among guns, which are mostly made from advanced craft goods, there still aren’t two completely identical ones. Bullets and the form of a gun appear identical, but the details are different. Even parts are not really compatible.

Even if Colbert tried to make the Zero Fighter’s machine gun’s bullets, he knew that it would be impossible. Though one can create a brass frame, it would still have too many identical details for Alchemy to deal with. Although it was hard to create brass frames, the production of the liquid "gasoline" was an entirely different matter.

Thus Colbert finished "New Liquid Container" putting the technologies to use.

In front of the laboratory in the Academy of Magic, Colbert, who with much effort had finished obtaining all the equipments for the Zero Fighter, with a deep sigh, watched his single-handed work.

During half of a year, though the new weapon was finished, he still wanted to accomplish more wonderful technologies, but his research results were settled there.

Seeing Saito, who had shown up in front of the laboratory, Colbert spread his hands.

“Ooh, Saito-kun, are you leaving?”

Saito had just finished preparing for the journey ahead. He carried goggles, which were Siesta's grandfather's keepsake, on his neck. Derflinger was tied on his back and a leather pouch was attached to his waist. Various items were placed in there.

“Yes,” Saito nodded.

“Very well. Will you head directly to the ship? Can you land this thing on the ship safely?"

This morning, the fleet had set sail for Albion.

The ship that should have taken the Zero Fighter with it had already sailed with the other ships and was waiting for them ahead. It was a special warship built to carry wind dragons, now it would carry the Zero Fighter as well.

The new and powerful ship, which belonged to the newly created *Dragon Carrier*-class, was named *Varsenda*.

Not only that, but Colbert, using Earth magic, placed enough gasoline for five flights within the ship as well.

So Saito only needed to take Louise with him on the Zero Fighter and land on that ship.

“Well, with a lot… One cannot be completely safe, right?

Saito said while turning around. Louise had not appeared yet.

“Because of this haste, I didn’t have the time to explain to you how the new weapon works.”

“Is that so…”

Saito found an iron pipe hanging under the Zero Fighter’s wing. What on earth is that tube for? But, there was no time for the detailed explanations now.

“But before you go, here is the manual I wrote for you.”

Colbert handed Saito a small notebook. Although Saito could not read it, Louise could. *I'll read it later*, he thought.

“Thank you.”

Then Colbert, looking hesitant whether to say or not, opened his mouth.

“To tell you the truth…”

“Eh?”

“To tell you the truth, I do not want my student to ride a vehicle used for war.”

He said bitterly.

“Student?”

“Aah, how should I put it? Well, though you are not a noble, I still think of you as one of my students. You don’t mind, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t mind that…”

Saito felt shy.

“I do not want to use Fire for murder. I…”

Colbert declared clearly.

“Why? Everyone is saying that the Fire element is the most suited for the war. Oh well, I do not know magic so well.”

“That’s right… Fire is the element of destruction. Fire users are of a great value… However, I think otherwise. I think that using Fire for destruction is lonely.”

Recalling the words, Saito hung his head, embarrassed.

“Oh yes, this flying machine is called ‘Phoenix’ by the royal army, right?”

“Yes, when I was attacking battleships with it at Tarbes, someone said, ‘This is the legendary Phoenix!’…”

“I see! That Phoenix!”

Colbert shouted, delighted.

“Teacher?”

“Phoenix is a legendary being. Phoenix… firebird god, a symbol of destruction…and a symbol of ‘Rebirth’.”

“Rebirth?”

“It's a reincarnation.”

Saito wondered why Colbert looked so pleased. Then, Colbert entered into a world of his own.

“That’s right… Rebirth… indeed… it’s a symbol right? Really?”

Then, Colbert noticed Saito who was watching him in amazement.

“Ah, aah! Sorry!” he bowed his head.

“No, it’s all right. I’m used to it.”

Colbert put on a serious look.

“Hey, Saito-kun… By the way, that…”

“What?”

At that moment, Louise showed up.

“At last,” Saito muttered.

“It can’t be helped! A girl has lots of preparations to take care of!”

“We're going to war. What kind of girl preparations are there?”

“Hmph!” Louise turned her face away, and ignoring Saito, climbed up the wing and entered the cockpit. One month had passed since they had run away from Louise's family.

Since then, things were like this.

Lifting up the rear bulletproof plane glass, Louise sat down in the seat.

“Well, errr, teacher, what were you saying just now?"

“N-no…it’s nothing. Yes.”

Saito boarded the Zero Fighter.

Then Colbert’s magic cranked the propeller, starting up the engine.

As it was the second time, it was possible to operate calmly.

Colbert, helping again, created a strong wind.

Saito put on the goggles and rolled the muffler around his neck.

Colbert shouted through the roaring noise of engine.

“Saito-kun! Miss Vallière!"

Saito waved.

“Do not die! Do not die! Even if it is hopeless! Even if you’ll be called a coward, do not die! Never die! Return safe and sound!”

Through the roaring of the engine, the voice was not heard. However, Colbert's words reached somehow. Even though he could not hear them, they reached his heart.

“Ok!” Saito shouted opening the throttle.

The Zero Fighter started sliding and bit by bit it started lifting.

Gradually it grew smaller, until it faded away in the sky.

Even though the Zero Fighter had disappeared in the sky, Colbert quietly kept on watching.

After flying for two hours, there was a small break in the clouds. It grew bigger while approaching, until it became a fleet buried deep in the sky. Saito was reminded of a race of balloons he had seen on the television one time.

Varying from 50 to 100 meters in length, hundreds of ships were queued up, making it a grand and a beautiful spectacle to behold.

“Incredible…”

Saito exclaimed in a voice of admiration.

“Hey, Louise, look. A huge fleet!”

“…”

However, Louise turned away, puffing her cheeks.

Louise's mood did not improve. Lately, after returning from home, she was always like this.

Saito tried to figure out the reason behind Louise’s bad mood.

After confessing my love, Louise looked like she accepted it for a moment.

Normally, one would expect a couple to get closer after that.

But I interpreted Louise’s reward, “Touch one place that you like,” as permission to touch everywhere, which made Louise angry.

And after Siesta’s “Unbuttoning” remark, Master, who has a very strong desire to monopolize, got even more angry.

From Louise’s perspective, flirting with another girl was similar to serving two masters at once – Saito misunderstood it greatly.

Actually, Louise was just jealous.

Flirting with other girls after confessing his love to her and kissing her was something she could not forgive.

And, even though for a moment, she was ready to surrender her chastity for this familiar, even her own thoughts were inexcusable. Until marriage, it was definitely not good. Even three months after marriage, it was definitely not good. Being swayed by his actions – that's what she was so angry about.

Because Louise kept being silent like that, Saito gave up.

At the moment, they needed to find that warship to land on. Several dragon knights flew up, surrounding Saito's Zero Fighter. They started waving; Saito waved back. Seems like they were going to guide him to the ship.

Following the backs of the dragon knights, at the speed limit of the plane, *Varsenda* came into view.

The ship deck was flat and big in order to carry the large number of dragon knights. The sail mast was about 6 meters tall, everything must look like small bugs from up there. It wasn't equipped with cannons as this ship's sole purpose was to carry dragon knights.

It was a perfect place to carry the Zero Fighter, or perhaps one should say that it was impossible for other ships to do that.

But even though *Varsenda*'s deck was long and wide, the length of the deck was still too short for the Zero Fighter to land on.

How could he land there?

Derflinger asked from his back.

"Partner, bring this airplane closer to the ship. Seems like they're going to catch us."

Many mages could be seen on the deck.

Ropes were put out on the deck. Soldiers grabbed the ends of each rope and

placed them perpendicular to the length of the deck.

It seemed like with Wind element spells and ropes across the deck, the Zero Fighter would be able to land. *Pretty rough*, he thought, but there was no other way.

Saito's right hand moved to throw up a hook to the ship. The hook wired up the Zero Fighter with the carrier, where it was fastened to.

Colbert who noticed the hook, was likely to have told to the crew of the Varsenda to stretch out ropes across the deck to help the Zero Fighter land.

They approached the Varsenda.

Then other hooks from the warship followed, fastening wings and tail. The flap was lowered.

Saito carefully approached from the rear, towards the ship.

Meanwhile, Louise didn't bat an eyelash for that sort of spectacle, and thought quietly.

Of course, at that time on the boat.

When she was pushed down by Saito…

How it would have ended, if neither her family, nor servants had spotted them, Louise thought.

"…"

This made her cheeks flush a deep red. She suddenly felt angry at Saito who, rocked in security, was handling the landing, and started to beat him.

"W-what are you doing?!"

"Why did you choose that place?! That place!"

Louise shouted.

"There's no other place to land!"

And so, they both completely misunderstood each other.

As soon as Saito and Louise landed on the Varsenda and got off the Zero Fighter, they were greeted by the officer, who was accompanied by an escort of guards.

“Deck Officer, Kuryuuzurei.”

“Where are we heading now?“

Although he was asked, the officer guided them both without answering. Where could he be taking them? In Henrietta’s instructions only the name of the warship that they were to land on was written, nothing else. And the instructions of higher-up were always like this. *Telling one subordinate, they think that they already told all. A noble’s subordinate must lead a long and tough life,* Saito thought. Henrietta did not appear to be an exception.

They are so confident, because that’s the way things are.

Through the narrow main-deck’s passage they were lead to a private two-man cabin. Although very small, it was still a private room. Within this cabin, there was an extremely small bed and table. Once Saito and Louise placed their luggage, they were urged by the officer to follow him again.

After going in zigzags through narrow passages of the warship, they finally stopped in front of a certain door.

When the officer knocked, there was an answer from the inside. The officer opened the door and let Saito and Louise in.

They both were greeted by generals sitting in a line. Golden mail-laces shined across their shoulders. They must be important commanders.

Dumbfounded, Louise and Saito took seats offered by the soldiers. Louise sat on the chair, and Saito after her.

The General in the most top seat, opened his mouth.

“Welcome to Albion Invasion Command Headquarters, Miss Void.”

Louise felt nervous. This general with a beard looked around 40 years old…

“Supreme Commander De Poitiers.”

Quickly, the general described his colleagues.

“This is Chief of Staff Wimpffen.”

A small man with a deep wrinkles sitting to the left of the General nodded.

“This is the commander of the Germania army, Marquis Handenburg.”

The General with a handlebar mustache that wore a steel helmet, nodded solemnly to Louise.

Apparently, this dragon mothership was also a general headquarters.

After that, the General introduced Louise to the staff and generals, gathered in the conference room.

“Now then, gentlemen. This is the trump card that our Majesty kept, I introduce you the ‘Void’ user.”

However, no one in the conference room even raised an eyebrow after those words. They just stared suspiciously at Louise and her familiar.

“In the battle of Tarbes, she was the one who gave the blow to Albion’s fleet.”

Only after De Poiters's words did the generals look with an interest at them.

Saito poked Louise.

“What?”

“…is it all right to be exposed like that?”

“If not, it would not be possible to cooperate with the army.”

It may be right, however… although Henrietta ordered Louise to keep silent, she

herself revealed it with ease, he thought.

Though Henrietta kept on saying that Louise was important, somehow her actions contradicted that. Thoughts about the queen made Saito sad.

Then he remembered Henrietta's tremble at that time. *Impossible,* he thought.

Anyway, he was completely sure about her.

The generals smiled to Louise. Fake smiles.

"You may think it is a hastily chosen headquarters. That is not the case. This ship ensures absolute security. You see, this warship, which is specialized in carrying dragon knights is not packed with cannons. It would be troublesome if enemies aim at us. "

"Ha, haah…then why did you make such a warship into general headquarters?"

The whole room burst in laughter as Louise questioned in a very cute, confused voice.

"In normal ships there is no space for such conference rooms. They are stuffed with cannons."

Indeed. For a flagship that controls a huge army, the ability to process information quickly is more necessary than offensive power.

"Enough with the chat. Let's continue with the war council," said a general of Germania. Smiles disappeared from the generals faces.

* * *

It was a tough war council.

Making 60,000 soldiers land on Albion was a secondary problem.

The main problem was how to deal with the powerful enemy air fleet. Even though during the battle at Tarbes 10 Albion ships-of-the-line along with the

Lexington were destroyed, 40 ships-of-the-line remained. Although Tristain and Germania had 60 ships-of-the-line because it was a united fleet of two countries, executive confusion was to be expected. When you take into account that the Albion fleet was said to be superior to a fleet 1.5 times their strength, the potential difference between them was canceled.

Secondly, the selection of the landing point.

On Albion's continent there were only two places where the large army of 60,000 soldiers could land all at once.

The capital city Londinium's southern airbase Rosais, or the northern port - Dartanes.

Because of the port size, Rosais was preferable, however… aiming straight there, their large fleet would be discovered at once and that would give enemy the time to prepare a defense.

"Wasting soldiers in the assault would put the capture of Londinium at risk."

The Chief of Staff calmly analyzed the forces and informed everyone. It should be kept silent. What kind of assault would that be with enemy resistance.

The allied forces needed a surprise attack.

60,000 soldiers wanted to land in Rosais without facing enemy resistance.

Thus they needed to deceive the large enemy army and draw their attention from the landing point at Rosais.

Simply put, the Tristain and Germania united army of 60,000… required a cunning strategy that would deceive the enemy into thinking that they would land in Dartanes.

That was the second problem.

"Can we hope for Miss Void's cooperation in either of the two?"

The noble with a staff badge asked while watching Louise.

“Could you blow up the Albion fleet, the way we blew up the *Lexington* in Tarbes?”

Saito watched Louise. Louise turned around and shook her head.

“It is impossible…I don't have enough willpower stored to cast such strong 'Explosion'. I don’t know how many month’s or years would it take.”

The staff officer shook his head.

“Then such an unreliable ‘weapon’ can’t be called our trump card.”

Those words made Saito respond.

“Hey, Louise is not a weapon.”

“What? It’s not for a familiar to talk.”

Before it turned into a fuss… General De Poitiers interrupted.

“We’ll take over the fleet. Let’s have Miss Void undertake the feint. Can you do it?”

“Feint?”

“We discussed it before. We only have to convince the enemy that we will land not in Rosais but in Dartanes. It should be simple for the legendary 'Void user,' right?”

Louise thought.

…Was there such a spell?

Saito muttered quietly from the back.

“…Didn’t Derf say that it can be read when the right time comes?”

Louise nodded.

“Tomorrow, I’ll look for a spell that can be used.”

General De Poitiers gave a hopeful smile.

He then urged Louise and Saito to leave the room.

"That was annoying," Louise said in the hallway as the door was shut. She stuck her tongue out while facing the conference room.

“Yeah,” Saito nodded.

“Those people, I think that they see me only as a gift horse.”

Saito tapped Louise's shoulder.

“These are the great generals? This way we won’t win the war this year.”

But, it might be a correct idea during the war.

The fighter is more than just a means of boarding the ship, it is also indispensable.

However, while thinking absent-mindedly, his shoulder was tapped from behind.

When he turned around, five or six nobles were sharply staring at Saito. They all seemed to be teenagers rather than men. They looked similar in age to Saito. They were wearing leather hats and clad in blue tunics. Like soldiers, they were wearing rapier-looking wands at their waists… yet they looked considerably shorter.

“Hey, you.”

Being addressed that way, Saito turned.

“What?”

“Stop it,” Louise muttered quietly, pulling his sleeve.

The boy in the middle with a long jaw-line seemed to be their leader.

“Come.”

Huh? With a suddenly agitated imagination, Saito, holding Derflinger, walked towards them.

They entered the upper deck where the Zero Fighter was placed. All of the Zero Fighter's parts were tied with ropes that were fastened to the deck. Not able to understand, and still trying the figure out the meaning behind this, the irritated Saito pulled out Derflinger.

"Is this thing alive?"

One noble boy asked embarrassed, pointing at the Zero Fighter.

"If it is not so, then what is that. Explain."

Another one requested for the explanation with a serious look.

Saito felt dumb-struck.

"No, that is not a living thing, however…" He muttered.

"Hurray! Didn't I tell you? I win! Everyone give one écu!"

The fattest boy began to roar. Everyone sulkily took out gold coins from their pockets pocket and handed them to the boy.

Seeing Louise and Saito with their mouths agape, the boys gave awkward smiles.

"Were you surprised? Sorry."

"Yes."

"No, we were having a bet. Over that thing."

A noble boy pointed at the Zero Fighter.

"We thought that it was alive. We thought that it was a dragon. "

"There is no place where such dragons could exist!"

"There might be! The world is wide after all!"

They started to quarrel again.

Seeing that, Saito recalled the classroom in his hometown. During the break, they also had similar foolish discussions to pass the time…

“It is a flying machine.”

He said, and the noble boys were interested immediately and listened attentively to Saito's explanation. However, they seemed not to be able to understand; an object that flies over the sky using power other than magic.

“We are dragon knights.”

When the explanation of the Zero Fighter ended, the boys guided Saito and Louise to dragons inside the deck. The Dragon Knight Corps had suffered a lot of damage and was almost completely annihilated during the battle at Tarbes, that’s why the dragon knight apprentices were incorporated into the army as true knights.

“Under normal circumstances, one more year of training would be needed though.”

Explained the shyly smiling plump boy, who had won the bet before. He said that he was a commander of the 2nd Dragon Knight Squadron. He was the one that had guided Saito's Zero Fighter to the warship.

The dragons inside were all adult dragons. They looked twice as big as Tabitha’s Sylphid. Their big wings seemed to be built for speed.

“It is very difficult to become a dragon knight.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Having a dragon as a familiar is not that simple. Not everyone can do it. Dragon familiars are hard to please, difficult animals, because they will only allow those riders whom they accept to ride them.”

“Does being a dragon rider require not only skill but also magic powers? Intelligence too? To see through that sort of thing and never let his or her guard down?”

Seems like the dragon knight boys were elite, and had considerable owner’s pride too.

“Can I get on?”

Saito asked, they nodded.

Saito tried to straddle it, but was thrown off quickly. The boys burst into laughter, holding their sides. Since Saito’s competitive spirit was strong, he took the challenge again. The result was the same. Even a small girl like Tabitha was able to get on a dragon with a cool face… this was mortifying for Saito, so he took the challenge many times.

Louise watched the spectacle from far away. Saito and the dragon knight boys were getting along well, he made noise and screamed like one of them.

The boys looked happy, and she envied them for a moment. *Why are they getting along so well and so quickly?* Louise thought while she sulked.

I mean, what do dragons have that your master doesn’t? He did that with me in the boat the other day. Yet now he plays, screaming with dragon knights?

Don’t we have a battle in the sky tomorrow? Isn't there a chance we will die tomorrow? Is this how you decide to spend your time?

Louise thought, while glaring at Saito.

I am insecure and scared, I’d like you to hold me tight

But I’ll never say it aloud.

And… she sighed.

The feint operation.

It was necessary to convince the enemy that the united army of 60,000 was

going to land not in Rosais, but in Dartanes… What spell would suit? She had not the slightest idea.

“Hey, you. You.”

The dragon knight boys noticed the looks Louise was giving off in their direction, as she idly swung her legs leaning against the wall, and asked Saito.

“Is she your master? Is it ok for you to leave her alone?"

“Uuh! Damn!” Saito turned pale. Louise was left alone. She’ll hit, hit and complain later for sure. However, he did not want to look so pathetic in front of his new friends. Boys are inexperienced beings, and a new mate should not show weaknesses. Saito was strong.

“I-it’s all right if it is her. Leave it.”

“Oooh,”

Applauses erupted.

“That’s the spirit. To oppose your master in such manner! You are not an ordinary person.”

Louise, who got angry at Saito's attitude, approached.

“What did you say?”

“No, nothing…” the moment when he shut his mouth, Louise kicked him between the legs. And once she turned to go back to their room, dragging him with her, the commanding officer called for them both.

“What are your plans for tonight?”

For some reason Louise’s cheeks turned red.

“Nothing…” Saito replied, Louise kicked him in the stomach.

“In that case, how about having some drinks tonight for our acquaintanceship?”

He carefully suggested.

“By no means, if we were to slip out of our rooms in the middle of the night, we would be instantly found out by patrolling ship officers.”

Everyone started to worry. They wanted to escape ship officers anger from being drunk. It would be discovered by tomorrow anyways.

Saito, who had an idea, put out his finger and said,

“How about making jackstraws? Make straw bundles and place them in beds.”

“Lets do it!” the dragon knights laughed.

However, Louise alone did not laugh. She bit her nails, as if thinking about something.

“What’s wrong?”

Conversely they asked.

“…You. What did you say just now?"

“Eh? Well… Making jackstraws?”

“That’s right. Jackstraws. We just have to make 60,000 jackstraws.”

“Huh? 60,000? The number of members here is smaller.”

“First of all, making such a large number of straw bundles would really be problematic, right?“

One dragon knight asked with a serious expression on his face.

“Bundle of straws? Use magic!“

With that, Louise ran out.

“What, she?”

Dumbfounded Saito watched Louise leaving. Once again they were not understanding each other.

Louise jumped into the private room given to them, and opened the Founder’s Prayer Book.

For a moment she closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them again. With her mind totally focused on the Founder’s Prayer Book, she carefully held it.

One page began to shine… Louise smiled.

At the Academy of Magic, where classes had just ended, a group of riders appeared. It was the same day when Colbert watched Saito and Louise leave.

Entering through the gates were Agnes' musketeers.

The girls who stayed behind in the school were surprised by the appearance of household troops who rode horses. *What’s going on?* they wondered. Old Osman, the school headmaster, came out to meet Agnes.

“Welcome, Musketeer Commander Agnes. What brings you here?”

“Just doing my work, thank you for your patronage.”

Old Osman muttered something in his beard. In his heart, he had subtle thoughts. *She probably came here to take the remaining female pupils for military training?*

Last night he had received a report.

Apparently, Henrietta’s royal government recruited a majority of nobles for war. The way it turned out - schoolgirls also were recruited as preliminary officers, if the officers were consumed in the Albion war. Old Osman doubted the methods of the royal government.

That’s why Old Osman did not take part in the ceremony at La Rochelle, saying farewell to the army.

The schoolgirls attendance was similarly prohibited too. As a result, Royal government decided to stimulate things by itself.

“Even though this war is inhuman?”

“The royal government at this moment is calling this war an ‘All-out war’.”

“All-out war. There is no plausible name to call it. The war that takes women and girls, what kind of righteousness could it ever have?”

Agnes watched Osman with cold eyes.

“Then what righteousness does a war where only noble men and soldiers die have?”

Old Osman was at a loss for words.

“Death is equal. It does not discriminate between women or children. Nothing else.”

Agnes determinedly headed towards the tower.

At that moment, the classes had ended in Kirche's and Montmorency's classrooms. Because the male teachers went to war, the number of classes had decreased a lot…

“However, there is an exception." Kirche muttered watching a man fully engaged in teaching.

It was Colbert.

He keeps teaching as always. Somehow the school girl’s face was not calm at all.

“Ehm, look. Because of the flame’s high temperature the color brightens."

He was roasting a metal stick on an open flame.

The heated stick was bent as he continued to explain,

“Well, there are a lot of metals that cannot be manipulated if the flame is not hot enough. Therefore, when using ‘Fire’, controlling the flame’s temperature is fundamental.”

Montmorency suddenly raised her hand.

“Do you have a question, Miss Montmorency?”

Montmorency stood up.

“The country is in the middle of a war. How… can you teach classes with such a carefree attitude?”

“Leave your worries at school… I am your teacher, and you are my student.”

Colbert settled down, and answered without changing the intonation.

“But… all classmates… even teachers, face the war.”

“And your point is? We should learn even more, because it is a time of war. To use it in war, it is necessary to learn to use ‘Fire’ for destruction. Study now, so you will have something to share with the boys who return from the war.”

Colbert said and looked around the classroom.

“You are just afraid of war,”

Kirche declared in a slightly thready voice.

“Indeed.” nodded Colbert.

“I’m afraid of war. I am a coward.”

From the schoolgirls throats escaped gasps of amazement.

”However, I feel no guilt.”

When Colbert clearly asserted it, a group of people rudely barged into the classroom. It was Agnes and her people.

They were wearing chain hemps, and long swords with pistols at their waists. The schoolgirls got slightly noisy, seeing women entering in such exaggerated attire.

“Y-y-you, w-what…”

Agnes, completely ignoring Colbert, ordered the students.

“I am Her Majesty's musketeer. I order you all in the name of Her Majesty to discontinue all classes from this point. Dress up and line up in the courtyard.”

“What? Discontinue the class? Don’t joke around.”

After Colbert’s words, Agnes turned her head,

“I had enough of babysitting… This is an order.”

Schoolgirls began to stand up grumbling.

Colbert blocked Agnes' way in panic.

“Hey! hey!. The class is not over yet!”

“It’s a direct order from Her Majesty. Haven’t you heard?”

Agnes said in an unpleasant voice.

“Following Her Majesty orders, I am teaching right now. 15 more minutes, the time given to me by Her Majesty to make the student learn. It cannot be ordered by you. All of you! Return to the classroom! For another 15 minutes I will teach! You can go playing war after that!”

Agnes pulled out her sword and pointed it at Colbert's throat.

“War game you say. Are you going against us? Mister, this is not for a mage to decide, do not go too far.”

“N-not at all…”

Watching the sword pointing to his throat, Colbert dropped into cold sweat.

“Are you a Fire user? They always reek of a burnt smell, an unpleasant smell that wafts from under the robe. Teacher, I hate mages, specially the ones that use Fire.”

“Huu…”

Colbert's legs began to tremble. He had to support his back against the wall.

“Listen, do not obstruct my duty.”

Agnes looked at the trembling Colbert as if looking at garbage, and walked away, placing her sword back into its sheath. Schoolgirls, with a similar scorn on their faces, passed Colbert by.

Left alone, Colbert buried his face in his palms… and released a deep sigh.

Chapter Seven: The Illusion at Dartanes

The 8 o’clock bell rang across the battleship *Redoubtable*, signifying the start of the morning shift.

The morning in which the fates of two countries and that of another would be decided.

Malicorne, who had been standing atop the watchtower, took in a long, deep yawn, before hurriedly looking left and right about him. If an officer cadet was to be seen yawning like that by a deck officer, a cruel punishment would surely await… Malicorne’s body did well to remind him in the two days he had been here.

Malicorne was the sentry on duty.

The ringing of the morning bell… it should be 8 o’clock in the morning right now… his shift had finally ended! All that was left to do was to change shifts with the next group of officer cadets, then he could finally return to the cabin for an eight hour sleep, the belltower in the morning was cold as hell... Malicorne could only idle his time by as he waited for the next cadet to climb up the tower. And the person who climbed out of the tower opening was his upperclassman at the Academy of Magic – Styx.

Malicorne remembered how he had said he was going to kill Bowood, but at the moment, nothing was more important to him than returning to his warm, cozy room and enjoying a nice warm cup of orchid tea.

Upon seeing each other, they both greeted and smiled to one another.

“Well, it looks like I’m gonna be freezing in this frozen wasteland, fat-boy.”

“But I still envy you, upperclassman, I mean, at least the sun is up and shining.”

“Do you still remember, Malicorne?”

“Remember what?”

“How I said I would take care of that Albion guy someday.”

“Of course I remember that.”

“I think it is best to proceed with it in the heat of battle.”

“I think so too.”

“Who knows how long it’ll be, before the fighting finally starts?”

In order to demonstrate his courage to the younger cadets, it was said that he almost couldn’t wait any longer. Malicorne looked up at the clouds absentmindedly… and drew in a sudden breath.

“What’s wrong, Malicorne?”

“…It doesn’t look like you need to wait any longer.”

“Eh?”

Styx turned and stared at where Malicorne was pointing, his face paling immediately.

“Enemy ship sighted!”

It was five past eight in the morning. The divisional command aboard the *Varsenda*, on which Saito and the rest were aboard, had just received reports of the enemy ship sightings.

“It was earlier than we had planned,” muttered General De Poitiers softly.

He had originally planned to make contact with the Albion fleet around ten o’clock.

“They're a bunch of impatient bastards,” commented one of the staff officers.

“What about the ‘Void’?”

“The spell had been decided upon last night. The plan will proceed accordingly.”

“What kind of spell is it?” General De Poitiers enquired in a low voice while looking through the battle plans. A staff officer leaned towards the General’s ear, and whispered to him the details of the spell Louise had reported.

“Interesting… It will be a triumph if it succeeds! Courier!”

A courier quickly ran over.

“Order ‘Void’ to deploy. Mission objective: ‘Dartanes,’ full operational freedom. 2nd Dragon Knight Squadron as escort. Repeat again!”

“‘Void’ deploy! Mission objective ‘Dartanes,’ full operational freedom! 2nd Dragon Knight Squadron as escort!”

“Good, now pass it on at once!”

The courier immediately headed towards the upper deck of the carrier where Saito and the rest were.

“With this, we can now head towards Rosais without worry.”

"Indeed."

De Poitiers then handed down a command to the subordinates responsible for engaging the enemy fleet.

“Transmit to all battleship captains. Once engaged with the enemy, do not let a single ship near the ground army’s transport ships!”

Up in the upper bridge, Saito, in the pilot seat of the Zero Fighter, began running through the starting operations of the plane. Sitting in the rear seat, Louise had her eyes closed, concentrating her will.

Just last night, Louise, having found the spell to use, had reported directly to the high command.

Upon receiving her report, the high command had decided upon a plan of action, and drew up a battle plan accordingly. It was that battle plan which Saito currently held in his hands.

It was on this morning, that the battle plan would commence.

In the meantime, a deck officer, standing on the wings of the Zero Fighter, was trying to instruct Saito, pointing to a hand-drawn goatskin map he held in his hand.

“Didn’t I already tell you? I can’t read the writing of this world!”

“Look here at this map! Dartanes! It’s here! Anyway, all you need to do is just bring Master Void here! Leave everything else to Master Void, she’ll handle it!” The deck officer yelled at the top of his voice.

W-What ‘Master’ Void? Saito couldn’t comprehend. What kind of weird call sign was that? Just hearing it made him uncomfortable.

On that piece of goatskin was drawn a map of the entire continent of Albion. For someone like Saito who had never learned navigation of any sort, he was completely lost as to how he was going to navigate through the landmark-less cloud-filled sky. Compared to when he could use landmarks to find his way towards La Rochelle, this was a completely different story.

“The dragon knights will lead you. Just make sure you don’t lose them!” Remarked the deck officer, upon seeing Saito’s unease.

Okay, okay, I understand… Saito nodded repeatedly.

True, a wind dragon’s speed could even rival that of the Zero Fighter. The experience back when Wardes had chased him was still clear in his mind.

Suddenly -

Boom! Boom! A fierce pounding noise rang out. The noise came from behind.

Saito spun around and looked towards the sky.

At that instant, a squadron of battleships that looked completely different from that of their own appeared from the clouds in the distance, advancing rapidly towards their position.

The armada, numbering roughly sixty combat ships if the *Varsenda* was included, rapidly changed directions and began rising slowly, preparing to engage with the approaching enemy fleet. Of course, Saito was oblivious to the fact that Malicorne was aboard one of the battleships.

The order arrived at that moment.

“Deploy ‘Void’! Mission objective ‘Dartanes’! Full operational freedom! 2nd Dragon Knight Squadron shall act as escort!”

Deploy now? Isn’t it too early? No… is it because of the enemy’s unexpected appearance that they want us to deploy so suddenly?

Saito shot a signal to a nearby magician, to help start up the plane.

However the magician, probably at a loss as to the starting procedures, just remained standing blankly. In order to start the plane, the propeller needed to be spun first…. But it looked like he was completely lost as to how he could get the propeller spinning. If Colbert were here, he would have understood what Saito meant immediately, and gone into action.

“Didn’t I already tell you!? This! You just need to spin this!”

“Huh? This? I don’t get what you are saying. Can you explain more clearly?”

As they were busy fiddling with the propeller, from the midst of the enemy fleet, three ships suddenly appeared, rapidly heading in their direction.

“A fire boat!” Someone had yelled out.

Saito turned and looked. The boats were all blazing with fire. Designed to be sent straight into an enemy fleet, these were pilotless craft packed to the brim with powerful explosives.

Before a response could be made, the ships had already shot their way to the front of the fleet. A ship near the *Varsenda* exploded.

The shockwave from the explosion rocked the *Varsenda*, tipping it violently.

Before Saito could even yell for help, the Zero Fighter had already began sliding towards the side of the ship… falling off the edge of the upper deck shortly after.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” Saito screamed.

The Zero Fighter, with its engine still idling, dived with its nose downwards toward the earth.

“We're gonna crash! We're gonna crash! We're gonna crash!” Saito could only frantically yell. Just then, Derflinger spoke:

“Partner.”

“What is it!?”

“Well, I’ve got some good news for you.”

“This is really not the time or place for this! Man, I never thought I would die like this… How cruel.”

“The propeller’s spinning, isn’t it?”

Huh? Saito immediately raised his head to look. Of course, the wind from the plummet was enough to start the propeller, if somewhat shakily. Regaining his composure, Saito activated the ignition switch. The propeller began winding up with a whine, before it quickly began spinning with a full roar. Saito pulled against the handle, and regained control of the plane.

“Phew… What a relief!”

Saito relaxed while wiping off the beads of cold sweat on his forehead. He

turned his head and glanced behind him, Louise was still busy focusing her will. *This girl is normally so restless and unsettled; it's only in the period before she casts a Void spell that she's able to concentrate, becoming completely oblivious to the outside world.*

"Partner."

"What is it?"

"You could always praise me a bit more, you know…" remarked Derflinger in a dejected tone.

"You're great."

"Just a bit more, just a bit, Partner. You threw me aside for so long… for you to not flatter me a little now, don't you think that's just a bit wrong?"

"Oh… you are so brilliant, so magnificent."

Why are all the people I'm stuck with like this, stubborn and insecure! Thought Saito, completely ignoring the fact that he himself was no different.

Before he realized it, the 2nd Dragon Knight Squadron was already flying around him. There were ten of them.

Adjusting the speed of the propeller and his throttle, Saito brought the cruising speed to roughly 110 kilometers per hour.

Unrivalled in terms of speed, the wind dragons kept up with the Zero Fighter easily. Saito waved at the members of the 2nd Dragon Knight Squadron, freshly formed since yesterday. They waved back. Sitting in the back seat with The Founder's Prayer Book open across her lap, Louise, deep in her trance, paid them little heed.

It seemed like the job was to simply escort this user of "Void" to the target objective.

It was for this reason that the roughly-formed squadron of ten dragon knights and a single plane were headed in the direction of Dartanes.

One of the dragon knights flew to the head of the pack, while the tail of his dragon shook left and right. It seemed like he was the leader.

He was the dragon knight that was said to have a sweetheart waiting for him in his village back home. A mere seventeen year-old blonde-haired boy, he was the same age as Saito.

To his left was a dragon knight of eighteen years-old. Having finally achieved his dream of becoming a dragon knight, his face was bright and cheery. As the third son of a noble family fallen from grace, he hoped to prove himself by winning glory in this war. To his right was a sixteen year-old pair of twin brothers.

The people present here were all friends and comrades who had been drinking all through the night till dawn. Those among the dragon knights were all very warm and welcoming, though they were all nobles. Their philosophy was, “When you are all flying through the skies, what difference is there between nobles and commoners?” meant that they all looked upon Saito as a fellow friend.

The roaring of the cannons of countless ships firing could be heard in the distance.

It seems the combined fleet of Tristain and Germania and that of Albion had begun firing their broadsides. The epic clash between the hundred plus ships had been set in motion.

The smell of gunpowder could be smelt even through the cockpit of the plane. Staring at an overwhelming display of smoke and flames, Saito was captivated by the sight, but…

Saito turned his head away. Within each and every explosion, were also the charred remains of tens or dozens of sailors being blasted to pieces. Such a thought sent a chill down his spine.

Before he could even sympathise with their deaths, a feeling of relief crept up, relief at how great it was that he did not have to be there. In an instant, Saito, to prevent such shameful thoughts from crossing his mind, began concentrating ahead. Without something to protect himself from, he wouldn’t think like that.

Amidst the canopy of blue skies and white clouds, Saito flew the Zero Fighter towards Albion, under the protection of the dragon knights.

In one swift motion, the Tristain-Germania combat fleet opened ranks and, developing a line formation, surrounded the three-pronged line formation of the approaching Albion fleet. As the Albion fleet tried to breach the blockade, the combined fleet hurriedly reinforced it, preventing a break-through.

If successful, it could perhaps be finished in one stroke… But, the distance was simply too close. With the two fleets so near to one another, the battle quickly broke down into a muddled chaos of close-quarters ship-to-ship fighting. Aboard the upper deck of one such ship, the *Redoubtable*, sat the trembling figure of Malicorne. Huddled next to him was the similarly shaky Styx.

Their teeth couldn't stop shaking. Even when they tried to stand, they found their legs unable to exert even the slightest of force to push them up.

Apart from the thick bellows of smoke from the gunpowder, and the lightning flashes of the enemy cannons firing, they could see nothing of their surroundings. The hull of their ship crashed against the bow of the enemy's, producing a huge crushing noise, followed by an equally loud crack.

Dragged suddenly into such a battlefield, Malicorne's world had been turned upside-down in an instant; he was unable to grasp what was happening all around him.

They, having been drawn into the chaos around them, no longer cared about dealing with Bowood. They no longer had the will left to do so.

All they could comprehend was that their ship and the enemy's had clashed together, marking the beginning of a ruthless melee not unlike that between swordsmen, in which you either killed or got killed.

Peering through the settling dust and smoke, one could glimpse the enemy ship… It was at that instant that they heard the order to fire from the decks above and below them.

A thunderous roar echoed from the cannon fire that followed. Numerous holes pierced through the enemy ship, blowing to pieces both wood and men alike. The enemy did the same, responding with cannon fire that just breezed past them.

The floorboards about them exploded into pieces, sending splinters flying through the air. Ropes danced through the air as they snapped, and spilt oil flowed down the deck.

Someone yelled to quickly release the sand.

Chaos. Yelling. Smoke. Blood. The smell of gunpowder…

The sound of metal cannonballs smashing against the hulls of battleships.

The endless rolling of repeated cannon fire… and the smoke…smoke so thick you couldn't even see ahead of you.

This was the battlefield that Malicorne witnessed.

Unable to bear the horror any longer, Styx sprinted towards the deck hatch. It was probably to escape to the relative safety of the deck below. However, an officer was already standing there, with a wand in his hand, prepared to prevent any of the soldiers from deserting their posts. Styx could only slip back, huddling on the floor with his head hidden in his arms. The deck officer headed towards them and bellowed:

"You two! What are you doing! Get up! I said, get up! Show me your courage! Aren't you supposed to be nobles!? Stand up and do your job! If you have none, then cast magic! There are enemies all around you! It doesn't matter where you shoot, you'll still hit the enemy!"

Malicorne tightly bit his lips, and placing his hands on the deck floor, forced his body up with all four limbs.

Just as he finally stood up, a foot kicked his behind.

Didn't I already stand up! I-it was all done with great effort! Malicorne grumbled.

But, before he could even suffer the humiliation of the act, he was yelled at again by the deck officer,

“You! The fat pig-head! Yes, I’m talking to you! Get up and fight! I don’t want gutless, death-fearing officer cadets who won’t fight!”

Malicorne drew up his face.

Wasn’t it because I didn’t want to be called a death-fearing pig that I volunteered for the army? If I continue like this, all I’ll ever be is a coward!

“You! Pig! Why are you still dallying about?!”

The bellowing officer, upon finishing these words, was swiftly pierced by a magical arrow.

Beyond the smoke was the enemy. So close was the enemy, that his face could be seen clearly. On board the deck of the enemy ship was a young man with the same chubby build as his, with a magic wand pointed in their direction. Even his age was practically the same. The opponent also couldn’t stop trembling like him.

The paleness on his face, the shaking of his entire body.

Lying besides Malicorne was the contorted body of the deck officer, his chest pierced through by the magic arrow, his body twisted as a result of the convulsions that came just before death finally took him. Sniffing uncontrollably, Malicorne cried out. Whether he was really yelling, or whether his mouth was just gaping open, it was impossible to tell with the endless rolling of cannon fire. Raising his wand towards the dark clouds above the enemy ship, Malicorne began chanting.

Just as the cloud cover broke to reveal the continent of Albion, Saito and company were spotted by warning ravens. Using the many flight-capable raven familiars which acted as an early warning screen, any intruder could be reported immediately to the dragon knight garrisons through the familiar’s master.

In such a situation, the vision of the familiar would become the vision of the master’s after concentrating.

Readying to pursue Saito and company, a dragon knight squadron took off from their base.

With the danger increasing, Saito and company picked up their speed.

The wind dragons of the dragon knights who flew ahead shook their tails violently.

The knights atop them pointed ahead with their fingers.

Ten dragon knights had spotted Saito and the rest, and were headed straight towards them. They would collide head-on if they didn’t do anything.

“Damn it! What do we do!?”

Sitting in the pilot seat of the Zero Fighter, Saito shouted out.

If the opponent managed to come down at them from above, they would leave themselves vulnerable to attack.

Yet, the dragon knight leading the pack still didn’t change direction. Regardless of whether they were attacked or not, they had decided upon continuing straight ahead.

“Aren’t we just inviting ourselves to be attacked like this?!”

Saito frantically prepared the fighter’s machine gun… before remembering it had run out of ammo.

“That’s right, I think we ran out of bullets already…”

Within the plane’s machine gun, there should still be around two hundred bullets left. However, with so little left, it might as well have been none.

Saito then suddenly remembered what Colbert had said.

“Louise! Colbert's new weapon! Wasn’t there an instruction manual!?”

But Louise, caught up in her trance, did not hear a single word Saito had said.

Saito grabbed Louise's legs and frantically shook.

"Hey! Louise! Louise! Now's not the time to be focusing! Before you can cast your Void, we're going to be shot down by the enemy!"

"Huh? W-what is it?! W-What are you doing?!"

"I don't care what you say; just get me that damn manual! It's under the seat!"

Louise frantically searched beneath the seat, and found the manual Colbert had written using goatskin.

"Found it!"

"Read it!"

"Um, this…. 'Secret of the Flame Serpent'."

How disgusting.

Wasn't there a better title to choose?

"Um – Dear Saito, when you are reading this, I assume you are already at your wit's end. That won't do however, so make sure you read this properly."

"Don't bother reading the preface already!"

The dragon knights of Albion were getting closer and closer.

Fast.

The enemies are riding wind dragons as well! Damn it!

"Um – You must first calm down, then pull the lever next to the stick that controls the speed of the 'moving machine'."

"This one?!"

Saito saw beside the speed-control throttle; a lever he had never noticed before.

“Let's pull it!”

The moment the aiming sight filled with the approaching enemy dragon knights, Saito pulled the lever.

Boxes hidden beneath the aiming sight popped open, and from it emerged the head of a toy snake. Watching its mouth open and close, only for it to say:

“Come on Saito! Come on Saito! Come on Miss Vallière!”

“What the heck is this?!”

The toy snake emitted a voice through magic.

It seemed that was all it did.

As for the enemy’s attack –

Since they were wind dragons, they did not breathe any fire. However, magical arrows flew towards and struck against the fighter, shaking the craft. A hole the size of a fist had been pierced through the wing.

Luckily, a hole like that wouldn’t affect its performance much, at least temporarily.

Louise continued reading the instruction manual.

“You already pulled the lever right? Yup, The Happy Little Snake shall give you courage! Come on! No matter what the obstacle is, you must persevere! No matter what, I’ll always protect you!”

“That goddamn baldy!”

Saito cursed, while staring incredulously at the ‘Happy Little Snake’ he had remembered seeing in class that had emerged from below the aiming sight. Louise, thinking that those rude words were directed at herself, couldn’t help but scream:

“Who the hell are you calling a goddamn baldy! Wasn’t it you who asked me to read it?”

The opposing dragon knights rose up into the air again.

To advance head-on from the front with both sides bearing fast-flying dragon riders, meant that they passed one another in the blink of an eye, leaving very little opportunity for an attack.

Therefore, the enemy decided to begin an assault from behind.

Meanwhile, on their side… their objective was to head to the target destination at all haste, to cast the Void spell, and thus they could only keep flying ahead.

If they were to engage with the enemy dragon knights there, reinforcements would quickly be dispatched, and hope for the entire army would be lost.

Diving to gain speed, the enemy dragon knights were slowly catching up behind them.

“Louise! Isn’t there anything else?!”

Louise continued reading the manual.

“Um… It then says something about a secret weapon to use when being chased by the enemy.”

“That! That’s it!”

“Pull the tongue that sticks out of the Happy Little Snake. Remember, pay attention! If there are allies around, make sure they stick close to you.”

“Why’s that?”

“How am I supposed to know?!”

Saito pulled a blackboard from below his seat, followed by a chalk. It was amazing that such things were in a zero fighter. It looked like the previous pilot used this to communicate. Saito passed it to Louise.

Louise wrote the words, "Come over here," on it, and, raising it out of the cockpit, waved it a few times.

The dragon knights nodded their heads and approached the Zero Fighter;

forming a pack, they continued flying ahead. Rather than continue being fired upon, might as well give it a try.

Saito shut his eyes and prayed:

“Please don’t let be something like the Happy Little Snake again…”

Saito turned back and, watching the approaching enemy dragon knight squadron, pulled the Happy Little Snake’s tongue.

Nothing happened.

Damn it! Next time I see Colbert, I’m going to beat the crap out of him! I don’t care if you're a teacher or not, I’ll worry about that after! Of course this is only if I survive and return, but I’ll still beat you up! thought Saito, clenching his fist in rage.

Just then –

Various objects blew out from the wings of the Zero Fighter.

They were the circular objects that he saw floating from the metal box when they left.

The sound of the object’s lighting up, overlapped with Louise’s explanation:

“I really think that my talent is almost too frightening! A metal rocket powered by combustible powders and fitted with magical artifacts enchanted with ‘Detect Magic’! You may call them…Little Flying Snakes! Since it uses its reaction to magic to approach the enemy, if you have any allies in the area, make sure they are gathered around you! To prevent harming your allies, it doesn’t react to anything within a twenty meter radius!”

Emitting a clean rattling sound, the roughly ten or so rockets launched themselves backwards, headed towards the pursuing dragon knights.

Several of the large, powder-powered rockets collided with the Albion dragon knights, and exploded with several bangs.

As the cloud of smoke dissipated, only half the pursuers remained.

The remaining dragon knights, their wind dragons having lost their will to fight, halted their pursuit.

“Yes!”

Saito and Louise cheered as they hugged one another.

As the tightly packed dragon knights began to separate, the sight ahead of them was again ominous.

Saito turned his view to the front –

The smile on his face faded in an instant.

Upon seeing this, Louise’s smile also disappeared.

“What’s going on?”

Louise slowly turned to where Saito was facing.

Appearing ahead of them was a flock of dragon riders, its numbers exceeding a hundred.

Albion’s dragon knights were unrivaled.

It wasn’t just their natural skill; even their numbers were totally unrivaled.

The surrounding dragon knights quickened their speed.

Nonetheless, they could only charge forwards.

It seemed they had accepted that.

But… there were countless enemies before their eyes.

Innumerable magic arrows began flying towards them from the enemy dragon knights, all directed at Saito’s Zero.

To withstand an attack from this many projectiles…he couldn’t dodge it even if he tried.

They were almost going to impact!

Suddenly, Saito witnessed something that shocked his very being –

A dragon knight unexpectedly jumped ahead of the Zero, and using himself and his wind dragon, blocked the approaching magical arrows.

After having been struck by the magical arrows, the dragon and its rider fell from the skies.

“W-what’s going on?!”

The first to realize what was happening in front of them was Derflinger.

“It looks like they are using themselves as shields.”

“Shields?”

“Yup. As long as you guys reach Dartanes, the mission will be a success. They probably received the order to sacrifice themselves if necessary.”

The countless horde of dragon knights continued to approach.

A massive fireball came next. Again, a dragon knight appeared and shielded the attack, before promptly dropping down.

“Hey! Hey! Stop doing that!” Saito exclaimed.

Derflinger moved towards Louise:

“Hey, missy, when I give you the signal, just pull the lever down there below the seat. That’s the last weapon that uncle installed.”

The legendary Derflinger could be said to be unrivalled in his knowledge in the field of weaponry. Louise nodded while quivering.

“My partner’s mind is in a bit of a mess at the moment, so it seems you’ll have to do it. Do you understand?"

At that instant, Saito’s squadron and the horde of dragon knights brushed past one another.

The enemy dragon knights were just like the ones before, rising up immediately, and pursuing from behind. The remaining eight dragon knights began separating from Saito’s Zero.

“Hey! Hey! What are you guys planning to do?!”

The one riding at the head of the pack smiled to Saito and waved his hands. Like how one would wave their hands goodbye once class had ended in school, it was truly too simple a way to bid farewell.

He was always the one that was friendliest to Saito; the captain of the 2nd Dragon Knight Squadron. A slightly chubby, blonde-haired boy who had once won the bet as to whether the "Zero was a dragon or not". Like Saito, he was seventeen years-old, with a sweetheart waiting for him back in his village… parents who awaited his return… he had told him that becoming a dragon knight had been his dream.

Saito suddenly remembered, he hadn’t even asked for his name.

The eight dragon knights turned around together.

Following the lead of the seventeen year-old blonde-haired young man, knights who had only become friends yesterday charged headlong together into the pursuing pack of dragon knights.

To allow Saito and Louise to escape –

It was all for this objective and nothing more.

“Turn back! Turn back already!” Saito frantically yelled at the top of his lungs.

“Now!” Derflinger instructed loudly.

Hearing his command, Louise immediately pulled the lever below the seat.

Swoosh. The sound of various objects separating could be heard from behind.

From below the wing of the tail, emerged a hidden object.

It was a metal cask many times larger than the rockets before.

The rocket, invented by the Fire-mage Colbert, left the craft and ignited.

Phoooooom! All that could be seen was a pale blue smoke, before the Zero rapidly picked up speed, as though it had been kicked by something.

At the same time, the dragon knights were quickly swallowed up the enemy's massive squadron… and quickly faded from view.

Louise panicked once she realised that Saito planned to turn around and head back. Derflinger also guessed Saito's plan, and warned loudly:

"Partner! Don't pull that stick! If we were to turn around at this speed, this thing's going to tear apart!"

The abrupt warning made Saito lean tensely back into his seat, screaming,

"We only met yesterday! Those guys actually killed themselves for us! Even though they only met us yesterday! Isn't this screwed up to you?!"

"I know that as well! But! But! Our mission is to use the Void spell at Dartanes! They were sent to protect us to ensure that we safely reached the objective! If we are to turn back now, and cause the plan to fail as a result… wouldn't that make their sacrifice meaningless?!"

Saito rubbed his eyes, and facing forward, muttered,

"I… I didn't even know their names!"

To be saved by someone you didn't even know the name of, or to be killed by someone you don't know the name of; is that what war is?

"Don't kid me! How can I accept such a thing! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Saito cried. To yell and scream like this was meaningless; he knew that, but he couldn't bear to not yell out.

The Zero Fighter, flying at a reading close to 450 kilometers an hour from the speedometer, flew forwards.

Despite being in the violently shaking craft, Saito was trembling all over for

another reason.

After shaking off the enemy, how long they flew for, they didn’t know.

After what seemed like an eternity, a port appeared over the horizon before their eyes. On the open expanses of a mountain, on which stood numerous steel spires used to anchor the ships floating in the skies… several things that resembled a docking bay could be seen.

“That’s the port of Dartanes…”

“Go up.”

Louise said softly into Saito’s ear.

Saito raised the Zero Fighter towards the sky.

In the wake of the speed boost, the Zero Fighter slowly lost speed.

Once they had reached a suitable height, Louise stood up, and opened the cockpit.

Gusts of wind blew in.

Louise sat atop Saito’s shoulders and began chanting the spell. The Founder’s Prayer Book she held in her hands began glowing. The most fundamental of magics.

"Illusion" – One had to imagine with their full concentration in their minds the image they wished to conjure.

In this way, the caster could replicate even the sky itself. The chant Louise was using was the Void spell that could conjure up illusions. The Zero Fighter slowly circled the sky over Dartanes.

The boundless clouds were seemingly wiped away from the sky, an illusion forming in its stead.

It was a huge fleet of battleships… a fleet supposed to be hundreds of miles away; a mirror image of the Tristain invasion fleet.

Having such a large fleet suddenly appear in the skies above Dartanes had a huge impact; the sight of it shocked everyone who saw it.

“What! Dartanes?!” Exclaimed General Hawkings, upon receiving the urgent report from Dartanes. He was heading the thirty-thousand strong Albion army in the direction of Rosais. According to his predictions, the landing point of the Tristain army would be there. And yet, the place where the enemy had suddenly appeared, was to the north of the capital Londinium – Dartanes. “Turn the army around!”

It would take some time before the order propagated through the entire army. *I wish we could begin marching quickly...* Hawkings thought as he turned to look towards the sky.

The sky was a canopy of pure blue, completely devoid of any clouds, a far cry from the chaotic war that raged on the ground below.

He had a feeling that this war would become a muddled one...

Chapter Eight: The Atonement of Flame

Early morning, four o'clock. The sun had not risen yet, the sky was dark.

In the sky above the Academy of Magic one small war frigate appeared.

Menvil stood on the deck, watching the sky right ahead. Wardes, with inaudible steps, approached Menvil from behind.

The wind’s square indicated by itself that it was the same sky.

Wardes came out to test Menvil.

Can this man lead such a difficult plan to success? He had his doubts.

However, Wardes's doubts seemed to be unfounded.

Not taking his eyes from the sign, Menvil called Wardes out of distance,

“So what trial is it now, Viscount?”

Wardes was surprised.

Menvil did not even turn around.

Even if he had turned around – it was just too dark. One couldn’t even make out an approaching silhouette.

Yet… what kind of skills did he use to notice Wardes approach from such a long distance?

“Now then, we're almost there.”

Menvil muttered without turning around. Wardes, while feeling admiration, carefully approached Menvil.

“We're lucky. Oh dear, as an attacking side, we should not let them know from which side they will be attacked.”

They managed to avoid mage's familiars that were patrolling in the air… it was fortuitous that they managed to get this far without being spotted.

“In order to express our gratitude, when you return to Albion, please let me treat you to something, Viscount.”

“Don’t think too much about it, think about surviving first,” Wardes said. Menvil suddenly pulled out a cane and pointed it at the scruff of Wardes's neck.

“Watch your mouth youngster. Or do you want to turn to ashes right here and now?”

Wardes expressionlessly watched Menvil.

“I’m joking, Viscount. Don’t stare like that.”

Laughing, Menvil jumped from the deck into the air.

One after another, all of the other team members, wrapped up in black cloths, followed Menvil.

A lot of people disappeared from the deck with a surprising swiftness.

Fouquet, who came up there, muttered in an unpleasant voice.

“Creepy guy. And scary.”

“But he has the skills needed. We can’t hope for more.”

“Is he more skilled than you?”

Fouquet laughed, asking Wardes a mischievous question.

“Maybe.”

The Musketeers Corps assigned two musketeer crew members to an artillery tower to watch over the cannon.

That was the greatest number of military troops that the army could allow to stand as sentinels.

Something moved under the moonlight.

The older member of the two squat down in silence, and unwrapped gun powder and bullets from small paper bags.

Another musketeer, following her partner’s movements, also loaded her musket with gunpowder.

And when she looked carefully… she saw something moving in the darkness.

But before she could open her mouth, both guards' throats were cut by Wind magic.

Two bodies were caught before hitting the ground. Not making any noise, Menvil laid the musketeers on the ground.

“Women. Still young. Shame.” One assassin informed Menvil with a smile.

“There is no place for old courtesy, men or women have to be treated the same.”

Menvil said, smiling rapaciously.

“Equally when death is given.”

“Only nobles’ children should not be killed. They must be taken as hostages.”

“Apart from them, I can kill everyone else?”

Menvil, while fiddling with his cane, muttered in a happy voice.

One member took out the map.

It was the map of the school drawn by Fouquet. It was covered with a special cloth that didn't leak out light, but slightly illuminated the map itself.

Looking at the corpses of the guards, one member muttered.

“Guards only armed with guns.”

“How many mages are there? Not counting the regular musketeers.”

The member who was studying the map informed Menvil.

"Commander, there are three targets. This tower, the dormitory tower and the tower nearside.”

Menvil handed down the orders quickly.

“I’ll take the dormitory tower. Jean, Ludwig, Germain, Attas – you four together with Giovanni take this tower. Celestin and the rest take the last one.”

The mages nodded.

Tabitha woke up.

There were strange sounds coming from the courtyard.

After thinking for a moment, she decided to wake Kirche up after all. She went out of her room and headed to Kirche’s room downstairs. After she knocked against the door, Kirche, dressed only in a thin nightgown on her bare skin and still rubbing her eyes, appeared.

“You what… it’s too early… even the sun hasn’t started to rise yet.”

“Strange sounds,” was all she said.

Kirche closed her eyes.

“Uwaaa.” Kirche felt her salamander, Flame, beating against the window.

“You too?”

The moment Kirche opened her eyes again, her sleepiness was gone.

Kirche hastily began putting clothes on.

The moment when she took her wand, the sound of a breaking door echoed.

Kirche and Tabitha looked at each other.

“Retreat,” Tabitha murmured.

“Agreed.”

Not knowing the enemies number or location, one had to pull back to recover. It was war basics.

Kirche and Tabitha jumped down from the window and hid themselves in the bushes and from there watched what was going around.

It was getting brighter - the sun started rising.

At that time, Agnes woke up in her bedroom and grabbed the sword placed at the bedside.

Pulling it out from its sheath, she waited at the door.

It was the second floor of the artillery tower. The room was always used as a warehouse and was only recently made into a bedroom.

In all, twelve members lived here.

They all resided in the room next door.

Agnes noticed the mirror placed in the center of the room. It was the "Liar's Mirror". The ugly made into beautiful, the beautiful into ugly – everything was turned upside down by the mirror. Agnes tried not to look at the mirror while

setting the trap.

Four people led by the mercenary mage Celestin went up a spiral staircase to the second floor of the artillery tower. They queued at the two doors.

Two men were positioned at each door while another one waited in the hall.

The doors were kicked open.

In the middle of the room a handsome mage set up his wand.

Alarmed, the mages started to chant their spells.

“Bam…”

However, they were also hit by magic. With his heart pierced by an ice spear, Celestin fell on the floor.

Agnes, who hid herself behind the door, noticed the success of her plan.

Celestin mistook his own reflection in The Liar's Mirror, which was placed here by Agnes, for an enemy and released a spell which was reflected by the mirror and pierced his heart.

Agnes felt gratitude to Celestin, who had been foolish enough to shoot himself with his own spell reflected by the mirror.

Another assassin, hastily flounced into the room.

But his throat was cut deeply from the side by Agnes's sword, and he fell down.

Then, her musketeers jumped into the room.

“Commander Agnes! Are you all right?”

She nodded answering their question.

“I’m all right.”

“Two people sneaked into our room. However, we finished them…”

Two people in my room. Two people in the next one. Four people in total…

Apparently these thieves crept into the artillery tower to kill them off…

“Albion’s dogs.”

Muttered Agnes, quickly understanding where they came from. The squad consisted only of mages. It was impossible to mistake them for simple thieves. They must be mercenaries employed by Albion...

Then, Agnes became worried about the situation outside.

Right now, there were only schoolgirls left in the academy.

“In two minutes I want you fully armoured and following me,” Agnes ordered her subordinates.

Menvil took over the women's dormitory without any problems.

Noble daughters were so frightened by his invasion that they showed no real resistance. He took all the schoolgirls’ wands and rounded them up, still dressed in their nightgowns, and confined them in the dining hall. There were approximately ninety people.

While he was doing that, his partners from the other tower joined him.

Seeing the academy’s headmaster Old Osman being one of the captives put a smile on Menvil’s face.

Menvil gathered all of the captives in the dining hall and tied their hands behind their backs.

Thanks to a magic spell that someone recited, the rope moved and twined around their wrists by itself.

All the teachers and students were female and were trembling.

Menvil sweetly muttered to everyone,

“Whaaat, calm down, if none of you try to stand out or make noise and if you do what you are told to, no one will get hurt.”

Someone began to weep.

“Silence!”

However, the schoolgirl didn't stop crying. Menvil came closer and pointed his cane at her.

“Do you like cinders?”

The words were not a direct threat, but it could be understood as one. The schoolgirl stopped crying.

Osman opened his mouth.

“Hey you.”

“What?”

“Don’t use violence against women. Albion wants us as hostages, yes? To use us as additional cards in negotiations, yes?”

“How do you know?”

“Experienced persons from far away barged in here – it’s easy to see what you came here for. Not for the riches for sure. So, please be more patient.”

“Old man, what value do you have?”

The mercenaries laughed loudly.

“How important is one old man for the country? Consider this.”

When Osman ducked his head, the intruders started to look around Alvíss Dining Hall.

One could clearly read, “I don’t want to be here,” on the mages faces.

Fuuun, Osman thought. They might still have a chance.

“Old man, are these people all the members of the academy?”

Osman nodded.

“That's right. That's all of them.“

Then the mercenaries noticed that their comrades had not returned from the artillery tower. *Are they taking their time?* No, he shook his head. The longer it takes, the more chances for the enemy to get reinforcements. And they should be aware of that. *Therefore*, Menvil ramified.

From outside the dining hall a voice was heard.

“Those that shut themselves up in the dining hall! Listen! We are Her Majesty's musketeers!”

Menvil and others looked at each other. Apparently Celestin failed. However none of the mercenaries changed their facial expression. A single mercenary glared at Osman.

“Hey hey. Didn’t you said ‘That's all of them’?”

“Musketeers are not part of the staff,” Osman said calmly.

With a smile on his lips, Menvil stepped to the doors to negotiate with the musketeers outside the dining room.

Agnes hid herself behind the tower staircase landing. She drove one group of commoner staff away from the courtyard so that they would not get too involved with the incident.

The morning sun had not risen yet.

At the door of the dining hall a tightfisted mage appeared. The moonlight from a gap in the clouds lit his figure.

Agnes held her finger on the trigger, while aiming her pistol at the mage.

“Listen! Thief! We are Her Majesty's musketeers! One battalion of our troops has you and your damned accomplices surrounded! Release the hostages!”

Agnes’ “one battalion of troops” was a bluff. In reality, there were only about ten people.

From the dining hall she heard voices laughing hard.

“We couldn’t care less about a single battalion of musketeers!”

“These musketeers have killed four of your partners already. If you surrender peacefully, we’ll spare your lives.”

“Surrender? Isn’t it the time to start negotiations now? Call Henrietta here.”

“Her Majesty?”

“Indeed. And for the time being, promise to withdraw your soldiers from Albion. My client seems to hate it when your soldiers dirty the country's land with their shoes.

Usually the army didn't turn back because of a hostage. However… because ninety children of nobles were taken as hostages, this might be a different matter. The invasion troop's withdrawal was a real possibility.

My responsibility. Agnes bit her lower lip.

She tried to concentrate – *A blunder is a blunder. The court people - they are still my responsibility.*

One musketeer whispered into Agnes’s ear.

“…we could send a courier to Tristania and ask for reinforcements.”

“It is useless. It doesn’t matter how many soldiers we have, as long as they hold hostages.”

Seeing such a consultation, Menvil shouted.

“Hey, remember. Whenever you call a new soldier, one hostage is killed. The only ones you can invite here are the Cardinal or Henrietta. Are we clear?”

Agnes said nothing.

Then, Menvil shouted again.

“Make a decision in the next five minutes. Call Henrietta or not. If there is no answer after five minutes, one hostage will be killed every passing minute.”

Another musketeer poked Agnes.

“Commander Agnes…”

Agnes painfully tightened her lips.

At that moment…

A voice sounded from behind.

“Commander.”

Turning around she saw Colbert standing and staring with surprise at Alvíss Dining Hall.

“Do not get involved,” Agnes said, trying to cover Colbert with herself.

“You'll be caught.”

“My laboratory is in the tower. What happened?”

Agnes got angry at Colbert's carefree attitude.

“Can’t you see? Your students were captured by Albion’s henchmen.”

Colbert looked over her shoulder and, once he noticed the mage standing in front

of the dining hall, his face turned pale.

“Enough already. Go back.”

Annoyed, she sent Colbert off.

“Psst, Miss Musketeer.”

She was called from behind again. This time it was Kirche and Tabitha, who stood in the shadows smiling.

“Aren’t you students? Thank goodness you are all right.”

“Hey, we have a good plan…”

“Plan?”

“Yeah. Right now you can’t reject any help.”

“And what is that plan?”

Kirche and Tabitha explained their plan to Agnes.

Agnes, after listening to it, laughed.

“Sounds fun to me.”

“How about it? That’s the only plan we have.”

Colbert, who had heard the plan, was opposed to it.

“It is too dangerous. The enemies are mercenaries. You can’t be seriously thinking that such cheap tricks will work.”

“No one cares about your opinion, teacher.”

Kirche said, not trying to hide her contempt.

Agnes stopped paying attention to Colbert altogether.

“They do not know about your existence. The key here is surprise.”

She whispered while pointing her finger at Kirche, Tabitha and herself.

Menvil sat on a chair looking at the pocket watch on the table.

Tick tick the clock hand moved.

“Five minutes passed.”

Hearing that, the students shuddered. If there were no words from Agnes about calling Henrietta after five minutes, Menvil said he would kill one of them.

“Don't hold a grudge against me,” Menvil said, pulling out his cane.

“Take me instead.”

Osman muttered, but Menvil shook his head.

“You are necessary as a key in negotiation. Hey, who will it be? You choose.”

An indescribably cruel question. No one answered in shock.

“Understood. Then I will choose. Do not hold a grudge.”

But the moment when Menvil said that…

A small paper balloon flew into the dining hall.

And once all of their eyes were focused on it…

The paper balloon exploded with a very loud bang.

With it, yellow blinding phosphorus flew out of the balloon.

It was directed to fly into the dining hall by Tabitha’s Wind and was lit up by Kirche's Fire magic.

The schoolgirls screamed.

Those mages that looked at it directly were now holding their faces.

Then Kirche, Tabitha, and the musketeers, with muskets prepared, broke into the room.

The strategy seemed to be successful.

But…

A lot of fire bullets flew up, aimed at Kirche.

Kirche, who had lowered her guard thinking about success, fired her own fire bombs at it.

Due to the resulting violent flames, the gunpowder of a nearby musketeer's gun exploded.

Her fingers were blown-off, and the musketeer started rolling on the ground holding her hand.

Kirche tried to stand up but did not notice the spell aimed at her.

A fire bomb exploded in front of her belly, and she received the full force of the shock wave from a close distance, knocking her outside.

Wrapped in flames, it was an effective attack. It takes time for flame to burn ... but an explosion gives an instant impact - the opposite of burning slowly.

She saw Tabitha staggering trying to stand up.

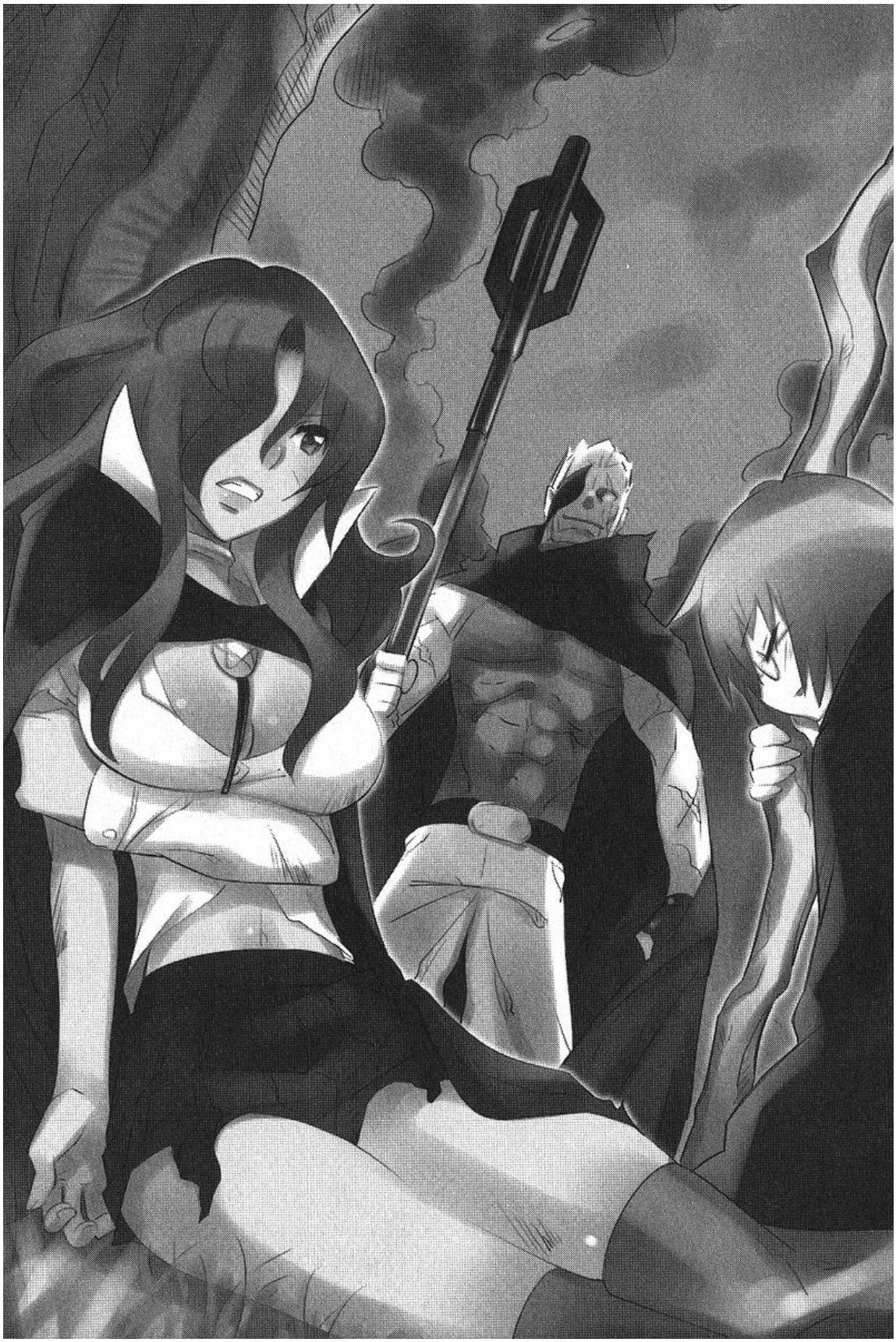
But then another shock wave hit her head… and she fell onto the ground again.

Menvil showed up from the white smoke.

Spell! But there was no wand.

Then she noticed one lying on the ground.

She reached for it, trying to pick it up but he stepped on it.



Menvil towered above Kirche, looking down on her.

“Too bad… Light bombs only blind one's eyes…”

Menvil said while smiling.

That moment Kirche noticed.

Menvil's eyeballs were not moving at all.

“Your…eyes.”

Menvil extended his fingers towards one eye.

And took it out. An artificial eye.

“Not only were my eyelids burnt, but my eyes as well. I can’t see the light.”

“H-how…”

But Menvil moved as if he was able to see.

“A snake finds its prey by temperature.”

Menvil laughed.

“I’m a Fire user, thus I am very sensitive to temperature. Distance, position - one can know everything in full detail by knowing how high or low the temperature is. You can even recognize different people by knowing their temperature.”

Kirche‘s hair stood up on her head from fear.

Who is this man…

“Are you scared? Afraid?”

Menvil laughed.

“When one’s feelings turn in turmoil, one’s temperature changes as well. Temperature changes tell a lot of things about one’s thoughts.”

Menvil’s nostrils widened upon taking a full inhalation of the scent.

“I want to smell.”

“Eh?”

“The aroma of you burnt, I want to smell it.”

Kirche trembled.

For the first time in her life she felt pure fear.

The fear that made a Queen of Fire whisper ‘No…’ like a small girl. However, Menvil just gave an anxious smile and said.

“How would you like to burn? There are many different ways of burning. This time you will be the one to burn.”

Not willing to see it coming, Kirche closed her eyes.

Menvil put out his cane, but the moment when flames started gathering around Kirche…

The flame was pushed back by another flame.

And once Kirche cracked her eyes open, she saw…

Colbert standing next to her, with a wand in his hand.

“…Mister?”

With an ice-cold face, Colbert muttered.

“Get away from my students.”

As if noticing something, Menvil looked up.

“Ooh, you… You! You! You!”

With a joyful expression on his face, Menvil roared.

“Is my temperature sense tricking me?! You! Colbert it’s you! I've missed you! It’s Colbert’s voice!”

Colbert's expression did not change. He stubbornly stared at Menvil.

“It’s me! Have you forgotten? It’s Commander Menvil! Aaah! So long ago!”

Menvil spread out his arms and shouted happily.

Colbert puckered up his brows.

That face had something dark in it.

“You…”

“How many years passed since our last meeting? Haaa! Captain! Twenty-years! That’s right!”

Captain?

What does that mean? The students started to whisper.

“What? Captain! You are a teacher now?! Isn’t it funny? You - a teacher! What precisely do you teach? You who were named ‘The Flame Serpent’… Ha, ha, ha! Hahahahahahahahahahaha!”

Menvil shouted with laughter.

“I will explain to you. This man here is a flame user that was called ‘The Flame Serpent’ before. He was a commander of the special troops… Women or children – he did not care, he burned them all completely.”

Kirche stared at Colbert.

“And he was the man… who took my eyes!"

Colbert was emanating something scary.

The aura around him felt very different from normal.

Burning his own people, even Kirche’s Zerbst lineage never engaged in such

atrocities. After all, those were nobles' duels.

However, the air that Colbert emanated today was different.

If you touch – you'll burn.

You'll burn and die.

The smell of burning flesh, the smell of death.

From the tip of Colbert's casually thrust out wand, a huge snake of flame, that looked too big for the delicate wand, sprang out. The snake bit the wand of one mage, who had silently started to chant a spell.

The wand turned to ashes in an instant.

Colbert smiled.

A cold smile without feelings, like a reptile's.

Colbert asked Kirche who stared at him in shock.

"Miss Zerbst. Do you remember the Fire element's characteristics?"

From the edge of a bitten lip, a stream of blood trickled.

Red blood, like flame, like Colbert's mantle.

"…fire's characteristics are zeal and destruction."

"Fire's zeal and destruction are its sole purpose. That's what you think. Twenty years ago I thought so too."

Colbert muttered in an unusual voice.

"However, it is as you say."

The moon hid behind a cloud again.

Their surroundings turned black as if painted by a dark brush.

A fight in the dark is difficult for an ordinary man. Because one cannot see his opponent.

However, for the blinded Fire user there is no light to begin with, thus darkness is not a handicap at all.

Menvil thought while gripping his cane and preparing a spell.

20 years ago my flame was defeated.

It was because of immaturity.

However, it is different now.

With time I became much stronger.

Though I lost light, I gained strong Fire instead.

Inner body senses were straightened and the nerves became twice as strong.

Now I can detect even the most subtle changes in the air.

Temperature of a person, flow of air coloured a shadow and the sight was projected into Menvil's mind.

“Take your friend and run away from here.”

Kirche nodded, and supporting Tabitha, tried to run away. However, the mage that lurked in the dining hall shot an ice arrow aimed at their backs.

A thin flame dashed out of Colbert's cane and entwined the arrow.

The arrow of ice melted and fell.

Once Colbert's flame was unleashed, Menvil's flame flew.

Fireball.

A ball of flame that followed Colbert's movements…

However, it was instantly burned down by the flame escaping from Colbert’s wand.

“Fufu, don’t.”

Menvil launched one flame after another, aiming at Colbert.

Suddenly Colbert was cornered into defense.

In the darkness he ran from side to side trying to escape them.

Even if one wanted to attack, challenging Menvil in the dark was not easily done.

“What’s wrong?! What’s wrong captain?! Don’t just run around!”

Menvil shot one fireball after another. The edge of Colbert’s mantle flamed up.

“Too bad! Just your mantle turns into scorch! Next is your body! I want to smell your burning body! This is me! Uwaha! Uha! Hahahahahahahaha!”

Wearing a smile tinged with madness, Menvil launched his flames.

“Kuu…”

Colbert shot his own flame of magic aiming at the source of Menvil's flame.

However, there was no response.

Menvil moved at once when the spell was cast and disappeared in the dark, not giving Colbert the chance for a counterattack.

One cannot attack an opponent whom one cannot see. Colbert frowned.

“Here! Captain!”

Yet his position was fully exposed to Menvil who could "see" in the dark.

Colbert hid in the bushes, then tried to hide himself in the shadow of the tower. However, it was not possible to escape from Menvil, who could track one's temperature very accurately.

Colbert, while running around and trying to escape, soon found himself in the center of the plaza. There was no place where he could hide.

“The best stage is prepared, Captain. You cannot run away anymore. There is no place where you can hide yourself either. Give up.”

Colbert took a deep breath.

And spoke towards Menvil's direction in the darkness.

“Young Menvil, I have a favor to ask.”

“What? You want to burn without suffering? Well for old time's sake, I will burn you in an instant.”

In a perfectly composed voice, Colbert said,

“I want you to give up. I already decided not to kill anyone with magic.”

“Hey hey, have you lost your mind? Can’t you understand the current situation? You can’t see me. However, I can see you perfectly. Where do you see a winning chance for you?”

“Still, I am begging you. This is true.”

Colbert fell on his knees and bowed. The Menvil's voice was filled with disgust,

“I… I was chasing such a coward for twenty years… you good-for-nothing… I cannot permit that... I cannot permit that for myself. I will roast you bit by bit, taking my time, without any sympathy, from head to toes.”

Menvil began to utter an incantation.

“Even if I ask, you won’t listen.”

Colbert continued.

“I am not a persistent enough guy.”

Colbert shook his head in sadness and pointed his wand to the sky.

The ball of a small flame shot up.

“What? An illumination plan? Unfortunately for you, the fire size is not enough to light the area around.

It was as Menvil said. The small ball of flame only lightly shined upon their surroundings. It could not replace the sun.

The moment when Menvil's spell was completed…

The small flame ball that was hanging in the sky exploded.

The small explosion turned into a huge one in an instant.

Fire, Fire, Earth. One earth and two fires.

Using "Gold transmutation" water vapor in the air was turned into oil.

With a spark it turned into a huge raging ball of fire…

The combustion of the raging ball of fire sucked up all oxygen around, causing every living thing within its range to suffocate and die.

It was a matchless "Flame bomb."

Menvil, opening his mouth to chant the spell, felt the oxygen being plundered from his lungs and suffocated in an instant.

If the enemy hides in the darkness… consign him to the darkness.

However, this spell kills everyone nearby. Therefore, Colbert did not use it until they had moved to the center of the plaza.

Colbert turned around and, while holding his mouth, approached the lying Menvil.

“You couldn’t turn into a complete snake, Lieutenant.”

Colbert whispered, while coldly looking down at Menvil’s face drawn with pain.

News about Menvil’s defeat shook the morale of his mercenaries.

Kirche, Tabitha and the musketeers who escaped injuries did not lose momentum and rushed into battle again.

Inside, between the screams of schoolgirls who stretched out on the floor, a single mage who had barricaded himself in the dining room was knocked down.

Agnes stabbed the last mage with her sword.

“Kuu!”

However, the sword did not come out.

The last mage released a spell aiming at Agnes’s back…

Many magic arrows flew.

Kirche, Tabitha and other musketeers were not able to react in time.

A black shadow jumped into the way.

He blocked the arrows from reaching Agnes with his own body. He uttered a spell and a snake of flame flew out the wand’s tip burning up the wand that the other mage was using.

Agnes stared in blank surprise at Colbert.

Colbert's eyes opened wide.

The voice that escaped his mouth was full of concern for Agnes.

“…are you all right?”

Mechanically, Agnes nodded.

The next moment Colbert toppled to the ground, coughing blood.

Students ran up in panic and began uttering the recovery spells for Colbert.

However… the injury was severe.

During that time…

Agnes recovered and pointed her sword at Colbert.

Shocked, students stared at Agnes.

“Wait! What are you doing?!” shouted Kirche.

Colbert with a weak face looked up at Agnes.

“You… You are the leader of the Magical Research Experimental Group platoon? Were you also the culprit who tore the name list in the Royal Military Archives?”

Colbert nodded.

“I will tell you. I am D'Angleterre‘s survivor.”

“… I see.”

“Why was my hometown destroyed? Answer.”

“Stop! He’s injured! Badly injured! Don’t talk!”

Montmorency, who was desperately trying to chant a Water healing spell, cried.

“Answer!”

Colbert answered looking down.

“…the order.”

“Order?”

“…it was reported that an epidemic occurred there. To prevent it from spreading we were told to burn it. We burned it reluctantly.”

“Idiot… That is a lie.”

“…Ha ha, afterwards, I learned about that too. In short, it was the ‘New Religion Hunt.’ I am tormented by guilt every day. It was… like Menvil said. Women, children - I burned them all. It was not permitted. But the memory still haunts me. I left the army. I swore… never to use Fire for destruction again.”

“…but those feelings didn’t stop your hand?”

Colbert shook his head.

After that… he slowly shut his eyes. Though Montmorency desperately kept uttering an incantation… her willpower was drained with time - she fainted and toppled to the ground. For the spell of "Recovery" to heal such a serious injury, special medicine was necessary… but at this moment there was none.

Therefore, though willpower tried to replace the specific medicine… it had its limits.

Other Water users ran out of willpower one after another and fainted. With many fainted mages surrounding Colbert, Agnes raised her sword.

However, Colbert was protected - Kirche covered him with herself. Her ever-present silly smile was now gone from her lips. Making a serious face, Kirche said.

“Please stop it!”

“Get away! I was living for this day! Twenty years! Twenty years I have waited for this day!”

“Please. Please.”

“Get away!”

Agnes and Kirche glared at each other.

The moment when tension in the air was about to break loose…

Kirche grabbed Colbert's wrist.

“Get away I said!”

Kirche answered in a stone-like voice.

“Please, lower your sword.”

“Stop joking!”

Kirche shook her head and muttered.

“He’s dead.”

With those words, Agnes's wrist lost its strength.

Shocked, Agnes fell to her knees. Her body began shaking little by little.

“…Hold your grudge if you want. However, at least pray. Teacher Colbert may certainly be your enemy… but he is your saviour right now. He shielded you with his body and saved you.”

Kirche said in a constrained voice.

Agnes stood up again without power, and said two words, three words, words that could not reach one’s ear. Then she lifted her sword and lowered it. The students averted their eyes, only Kirche alone did not shut her eyes and watched.

The sword stuck deeply into the ground next to Colbert.

Turning on her heels, Agnes began to slowly walk away.

After Agnes disappeared… Kirche tried to carry Colbert's body, a red ruby ring shone on her finger.

A crimson ruby, like burning fire.

While watching the ruby… tears escaped Kirche’s eyes.

It was the ring that he gave me.

He said, “I’m giving this to my student,” and gave the ring to her, who was acting like a spoiled brat. Remembering that, Kirche started to weep.

On the deck of *Redoubtable* Malicorne and Styx sat down with blank surprise all over their faces..

The number of warships had decreased to two-thirds while making a sortie aimed at Albion’s fleet.

Tristain's fleet won the battle. Somehow they were able to repel Albion’s fleet. Albion’s fleet lost more than a half of their ships and scrambled to get away.

It was a big victory.

But… Malicorne thought.

Is this a victory?

He was alive just to see such devastation. It was like a painting of hell. The deck was burning like kindling, heavy losses everywhere. The number of naval guns in the portside was reduced by half, as for the starboard - the battery was completely lost on every deck.

After receiving as many as five direct hits, the starboard of *Redoubtable* was annihilated.

200 hundred people from the 600 crew were either killed or injured.

However, *Redoubtable* was still slicing through the sky.

Malicorne was alive too.

To survive among flying spells, bullets and cannonballs – he must have been lucky. Whenever a new enemy ship passed, Malicorne created a dark cloud while yelling. Otherwise, he would have fainted from fear. He had no idea whether it was effective or not.

“Styx,”

Malicorne said in a dying voice.

“What?”

Styx responded in an exhausted voice.

“Life is a weird thing, don’t you think?”

“I fully agree with you.”

On the deck, Bowood and the commander of a warship walked. They were talking about the battle progress.

The officer cadet that was guiding them both spotted the two people sitting on the deck and bellowed.

“Hey! You! No time to sit around! Stand up! Stand up now!”

Hastily Malicorne and Styx stood up.

“Start preparing. Wait with the commanding officers and officer cadets inside.”

Malicorne and Styx looked at each other. They just survived one deadly battle. How can they vigorously start preparing for another one?

“Move it! Don’t make officers wait!”

Then… Bowood admonished the officer with a smile.

“Ah, senior, they just experienced their first battle campaign. You must let them take a rest for today.

“Ah! But, however…”

“I guess, that this is your first time smelling the smoke of powder as well? Once I had, too.”

Hearing the Albion officer speaking like that, the senior officer nodded.

“Very well, you may take a rest for tonight.”

Relieved, Malicorne and Styx saluted. Malicorne watched them leaving and muttered.

“Ironically, we were saved by a person from Albion.”

“Indeed.”

Styx weakly muttered and they both slumped on the deck again.

In the strategic conference room of *Varsenda*, General De Poitiers received the report.

It came from Rosais, from one dragon scout of the first unit. General De Poitiers smiled gloatingly.

Chief of Staff Wimpffen watched his superior officer’s face.

“Must be good news,” he muttered.

“The troops in Rosais area are said to be gone. Void managed to lure the enemy to Dartanes.”

“That’s just the first obstacle.”

De Poitiers nodded and gave the command.

“All fleets ships head to Rosais. We must decide upon landing. Gather all commanders.”

The messenger received the General's instruction and dashed out.

De Poitiers nodded.

“Now then, I wonder if I can become field marshal now or not, I don’t want to wait for one more week.”

Even if the landing succeeds, it will still probably be a tough fight.

Albion still had 50,000 untouched troops resting.

In the sky of Dartanes, Saito’s plane headed towards the confluence point with the Tristain fleet.

The plan was to join the fleet at Albion’s boundary.

Saito, who sat in the pilot’s seat, was silent for a long time.

Whatever Louise tried to speak about, he did not answer.

Only once Saito opened his mouth.

“They…”

“Yes.”

However, Saito did not say anything since then.

Louise found a letter within Colbert’s manual. But because of all the craziness around she did not pay attention to it.

“Letter.”

This got Saito’s attention.

“Letter?”

“Yes. Mister Colbert’s. Read it?”

Saito nodded.

Louise spread the letter and started to read it aloud.

Saito-kun, was my invention useful?

If it is so, then I am glad. For you… no, to all students, not just as a teacher, it would make me happy if it would be of any use to you. Very happy.

Now, why did I decide to write this letter today – I have a request. No, nothing weird. And be relieved it is not about money either.

As to what this discourse is about, it is some dream of mine.

That things, which one can only do by magic, could be done by technologies that everyone could use.

Have you seen? Happy Little Snake.

Well, that certainly is not just a toy…

I hope that there will be a use for every splendid technology some day.

It is my dream.

Let's get to it, though I‘m still worrying whether to say it or not…

In the past, I committed a crime.

Too big of a crime.

It is so big that it will never be forgiven.

As a redemption for this crime I have devoted myself to research…

Recently I thought.

No, my crime will never be forgiven.

Even if my inventions are useful… It won’t erase the crime I committed.

Therefore, I want you to promise me one thing.

Look, you will be facing a lot of difficult situations.

And you will go into war, and you will see many people die.

But…

Do not get used to it.

Do not become accustomed to people's death.

Do not think that it is natural.

The moment you do that – something will break.

I do not want you to become like me.

Therefore, I ask repeatedly.

Do not become accustomed to war.

Do not become accustomed to killing each other.

Do not become accustomed to death.

Behind the clouds... one could see the Tristain-Germania united fleet heading to Rosais.

The number of ships had decreased a lot.

Still… most ships were still intact, so they likely won the battle.

Even though they had won, the ones that survived looked worn-out. Many of the ships' hulls were damaged, masts were broken. There was a ship that lost all of its cannons completely as well.

Louise continued to read the letter aloud.

Well, my request is coming to an end.

Remember, what you said to me once?

That you came from a different world.

In this world of yours, the flying machines that you use pierce the sky, and technology is much better developed than in Halkeginia, right?

This is what I would like to see.

I could use it in my research.

Therefore, when you go east… I want you to take me with you.

No, I am not joking. Seriously.

Therefore, do not die.

Return alive absolutely.

Even if I can't go to the east with you.

P.S.

In that world, are there "cars" that everyone can use and they drive them on the roads?

Are there little boxes with which one can communicate over long distances?

Has a person really reached the moon?

To be able to do that without magic, it must be really wonderful.

I want to see that kind of world.

“That’s it. What a weird person. He really wants to go to your world.”

Saito, while sniffing, thanked Louise.

“Thank you.”

Louise gently embraced Saito's neck. And murmured,

“Idiot. Why are you crying?”

“…felt like crying.”

“…Many things happened today, you're just tired. Once we're back on the ship, let's just get some rest.”

Louise closed her eyes, and softly kissed Saito’s neck.

Once *Varsenda* appeared, Saito turned the nose of the plane towards it.

On the bright sunny day, the sooty fleet looked as though it was dyed in a beautiful black paint.